# The Workforce of the Future: HR's Role in Managing the Amoeba

**Author: Al Adamsen . November 2021**

Organizations are comprised of people and the assets they use. They are formed at the outset of a business and, over time, to get work done. Employees do some of the necessary work. Other work is done by contractors, consultants, outsourced providers, and alliance partners. Still, other work is done by hardware and software – machines – and increasingly smart machines that leverage robotics, sensors, predictive analytics, machine learning, AI, and a host of other innovative technologies and analytical techniques. In this way, over time, an organization changes form – ebbs, and flows – much like an amoeba. It might stretch to use more employee-centric power during one period then shrink that capability to leverage third parties or technology during another period. It might then split, acquire, lay off, hire rapidly, outsource, automate… any number of things to change into an appropriate form to meet market and environmental conditions.

But, in the form, an organization takes truly the *appropriate* organizational form, or is it merely the one the comes into existence at a certain point in time?

The opportunity that's available and that is now a race to figure out, is how to systematically measure and manage *work* over time -- regardless of who, or what is doing it. The ones that do figure this out will find themselves with a distinct, hard-to-replicate competitive advantage. In the simplest terms, they'll be able to get work done faster, more efficiently, and more effectively than their competitors.

This should provide ample motivation, yet the ever-expanding array of options on how work can get done is pushing many leaders to a *deer-in-the-headlights* response: "It's too complex." "We just need to hire more good people." "We just need to digitize or automate processes." "We just need to leverage AI.". Needless to say, these responses either simply ignore the reality before them or serve as wholly inadequate responses to it. This is cannot stand. Leaders must now ask themselves questions like:

- How do all the components of a work function *together* to get work done?
- What is our holistic understanding of how work will get done next month, next year, and over the next 2+ years?
- What are the disruptions we'll face and opportunities we can leverage?
- What can we gain by having an integrated, disciplined approach to designing, measuring, and managing work over time?
- How will we build such a capability? And what will it take to sustain and enhance it?

Answers to these questions are often "I have no idea", "We just have to focus on what's right Answers to these questions are often "I have no idea", "We just have to focus on what's right in front of us", or the classic, "We're not there yet." Much of the reasoning behind these responses is often captured in statements like, "We haven't needed such an approach to date, so why do we need one now?" This rationale is troubling. The world is changing, and at an ever-increasing pace, thus moving forward in the absence of a systematic process around work design and management will all but guarantee excessive waste, inefficiencies, poor productivity, slow innovation, and low employee engagement. Employees might end up being overworked, under-compensated, over-compensated, under-trained, mistrained, in the wrong roles, or doing marginally value-added work. Contractors might be too many or too few. Technologies could be inappropriate or underutilized. A host of sub-optimal outcomes not only could emerge, they likely will.

## This Has to Change, But to What? And Who Will Take the Lead?

Right now, in most organizations, there are four roles best-suited to lead the *this-is-how-we're-going-to-get-work-done* decision-making process. They are the Chief People Officer (CHRO), Chief Information Officer (CIO), Chief Technology Officer (CTO), and Chief Operations Officer (COO). Ideally, a governance structure, supported by process and information, will align the agendas of these individuals. Can we add the CEO's Chief of Staff to this list? Sure. A facilitator bringing these historically disparate functions and functional leaders together on an ongoing, recurring basis for a clear purpose would, no doubt, be advisable. That said, this isn't always possible, thus two of these four are best-suited to take the lead. They are the CHRO and CIO.

CIO's, of course, is responsible for providing insight and ideas on how to improve internal processes, position product, accelerate innovation, etc. -- how information can serve as a source of competitive advantage. Who builds data capture systems and generates much of the data that supports the analytics done within the CIO's function? The people within the organization, of course -- those doing the work. What data and information do they generate? Is it consciously created or is it collected after processes and technologies have already been implemented? Historically, unfortunately, in most organizations it's been after the fact, thus people and process-related data supporting internal analyses have often been poor, non-existent, or flat out misleading. The good news: This is changing. How is it changing? An integrated approach to *Employee Experience Design*.

CHRO's main contribution to an organization, arguably, is to ensure it has the right talent, in the right place, at the right time, at the right price, and for the right reasons. Implied in this statement and others like it is that the organization *knows how much* talent it needs relative to the work it needs to be done.

Also implied is that there's a clear definition of what "right" means. For our purposes here, we'll say "right" means an organization's ability to accurately craft a role, as well as accurately locate, assess, and place individuals with appropriate technical skills to do the work within that role. "Right" also means the individual will have a high likelihood of being engaged and, consequently, exhibit behaviors that positively contribute to the organization's culture. Culture, of course, is everyone's responsibility (and opportunity), yet consciously creating, maintaining, or enhancing it over time is often *facilitated* by the CHRO and their team. Facilitating the design and delivery of organizational culture, then, is another of the CHRO's main contributions. And how is this done? The answer again: *Employee Experience Design*.

## Employee Experience Design

Employee Experience Design is simply consciously crafting interactions that inspire certain thoughts and feelings over time. Contrary to how it might sound, it is not meant to be overly structured or contrived. Instead, it's meant to help people feel seen, heard, and empowered. It's meant to inspire authentic expression and conversation so people feel *safe* -- emotionally, psychologically, and physically -- so they, in turn, can do their best work. In this way, Employee Experience Design strives to humanize the corporate experience. It strives to understand what's important to an individual (most often through the use of archetypes or personas) and, in turn, to deliver on that need or desire over time. These experiences then serve as the inputs to the stories employees tell themselves and others about their employment experience. These stories, of course, are the real culture; and become the culture that's known both inside and outside the organization. Of course, if the culture is positive, a host of benefits emerge:

- Better engagement
- Better innovation
- Better productivity
- Better retention
- Better talent attraction
- More speed
- Better financial results

These positive outcomes stem from the deep-rooted belief -- the trust -- that the organization and its leadership aren't interested in employees as an expense to be minimized or "human capital assets" to be maximized, but as people with certain wants, needs, fears, and ideas: people with families, people with student debt, people who want to grow, feel more secure, be healthier, and contribute in ways that align with their values and purpose.

Understanding, documenting, and designing an employee experience requires that organizations think about the data and information employees create, are exposed to, and that are absent. After all, data affects behavior, both the consumption of it (e.g., looking at a performance metric) and the generation of it ("Where is my data going and how is it being used?").

With all this in mind, a multi-disciplined team is required to design employee experiences. It's not just HR. In fact, HR functions best as the facilitator, not the project or process "owner". This is critical, as all leaders need to be involved in consciously creating a culture and customer connection. They can't merely sponsor the effort. They need to own it – get into the work. An overview of an employee experience design process is detailed below:

# Employee Experience Design Process
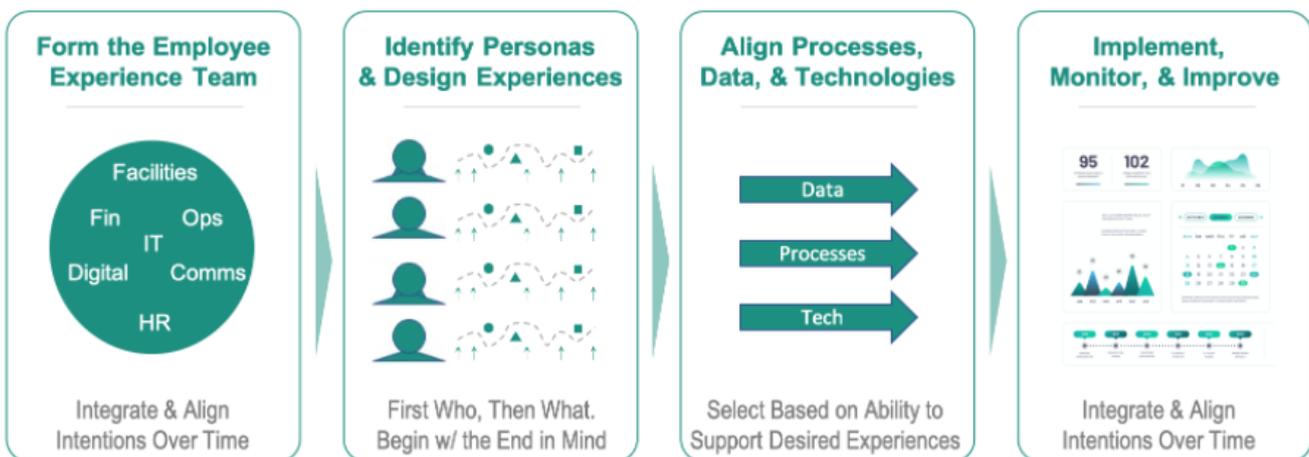


Whichever process an organization uses, whichever employee experience framework1 is employed, the unmistakable need now and that the effort needs to start with forming a multi-disciplinary team. Why? Because employee experience design isn't enough.

## Employee Experience Design is Not Enough

The Workforce of the Future is not just going to involve employees. It's going to involve contractors, consultants, third-party outsourcers, affiliate partners, etc. This is already a reality, of course, as was highlighted at the outset. Unfortunately, though, in most organizations, these multiple components are not consciously orchestrated. Procurement manages contingent labor on other talent augmentation

relationships. HR facilitates talent acquisition and employee development: those on the payroll.

IT manages technologies and infrastructure. Operations dominate the day-to-day interactions and prioritization of work. Finance manages the budgets allocated to these groups. Do these functional leaders get together periodically to align on the work required, explore trade-offs, then ultimately craft the most efficient and effective means to move forward? Again, unfortunately, the answer is most often, "No." Will this change? Yes. It must.

Employee Experience Design is not enough. While it's clearly a domain requiring HR's leadership, it's hopefully also clear that it's a unique gateway to a more ambitious, more impactful objective. Most, though, don't view it as such. They view employee experience design as a project, and a limited project at that: We'll improve the employee experience then move onto the next project, the next priority. The hard truth is this, though: the employee experience is never done being updated and improved.

Employees change. Environments change. Technologies change. Candidates change. Market realities change. Budgets change. The employee experience, thus, needs to be continually updated to accommodate these changes.

To be more impactful, Employee Experience Design cannot be absent of workload management and the tools used to do the work. It requires visibility into the nature of the work *and* the amount of it, then clearly identifying the work that'll be done by employees. This will then inform talent strategies: org design, workforce planning, talent acquisition, training, internal mobility, workforce analytics, etc. It will also inform IT, Operations, and other strategies. In the end, employee experience management will either evolve into or emerge as a sub-component of, overall work design and execution. It needs to.

## The Design of Work

In mid-2017 Amazon agreed to purchase Whole Foods Markets here in the U.S. The speculation at the time, and still, is whether or not Amazon will broadly deploy the same technology and processes it's using in its Amazon Go stores in Seattle. If it does, whether next year or five years from now, the move will drastically affect the number of employees needed at each store, as well as what they do, how they do their tasks, at what frequency, etc. This imminent shift, however drastic or slight, is already affecting employees' perceptions of their employer and their work future. Some feel hopeful and excited. Others are concerned and cautionary. Whatever feelings emerge, Whole Foods and Amazon's leaders would be

well-served to consciously manage communications, related expectations, and how imminent changes will likely affect everything from employment status to employees' day-to-day activities (e.g., Will checkers have a job?). If such an approach isn't taken, then the inevitable uncertainty will almost assuredly elevate anxiety, compromise productivity, and adversely affect a culture that, to date, has been a model of success (Whole Foods has been on *Fortune*'s 100 Best Companies to Work For List for 20 straight years).

Other examples can be found across industries. In trucking, for example, driverless trucks will, at some point, greatly reduce the need for truck drivers. Now while Similarly, and this might happen even earlier, the disruption caused by driverless trucks might cause trucking companies are now facing a likely massive disruption.

Even the medical industry has disruption looming. Historically, doctors collected data from a patient, made a diagnosis, then prescribed a treatment plan. Very soon, it may be the case that doctors have very little role in data collection (heart rate, blood measures, etc.) *and* diagnosis (what the issue or potential issue is). Even the treatment plan may be largely designed, measured, and monitored by hardware and software, tools that both feed and leverage artificial intelligence.

In this example and the ones highlighted before, what's the role HR should play? Will HR even have a role?

These questions need to be answered, as these examples are not theoretical. They're either happening or imminent, at least to some degree. As such, the way work is designed and executed needs to be more systematically thought through and managed. A way to do this is depicted in the adjacent graphic, *The Work Framework*. It suggests that employees are those providing a high competitive advantage, thus should be secured over the long term ("long term" being defined by each organization to reflect its unique reality and mission). Consultants are a highly competitive advantage, yet serve as short-term resources. Contractors and contingent labor are relatively low competitive advantage and also short term. Finally, outsource providers and automation are a relatively low competitive advantage, yet deliver a value proposition of the longer term. The Work Framework thus identifies the key elements of the organizational amoeba. It helps leaders think through how an organization can best ebb and flow over time: what to contract, what to expand, etc. The lines and arrows depict the macro trends in each dimension. In the end, leaders can form a Work Plan and measure, monitor, and adjust over time.

## Summary & Signals

The *Workforce of the Future* cannot be thought of independently from those other people, those other entities, and those other things (robots, AI, etc.) doing work on behalf of an organization. All of them affect the employee experience, the organization's culture, its brand, and its overall efficiency, effectiveness, and success. Is serving as the facilitator of work design and execution taking HR out of its "lane"? Not at all. It's expanding its scope and influence, for sure, yet in doing so it's making the function more relevant, powerful, and impactful. Plus, no other function has yet filled the demand for this role, and, frankly, no other function is as well-suited to do so. Thus, as more organizations choose to use employee experience design techniques, the opportunity arises to ask and answer some very basic, yet increasingly insightful questions:

1. What's the work that needs to be done?
2. What will it take to get the work done? (Capability)
3. How much time will it take to do the work? (Capacity) -- looping with #4
4. Who, or what will do the work? (The Work Plan) -- looping with #3
5. Where will the work be done? (Workplace and Location Strategy)

As a final example, if the answer to this last question is "On the organization's property," then will it be advisable to have an onboarding process for employees, contractors, consultants alike? All interact, thus contribute to the culture, yes? Of course, it would be beneficial, yet our functional, siloed thinking has anchored what's possible to an old mindset. The mindset of all this has to shift. It has to shift to a more integrated, systematic way of thinking, one that looks at a diverse array of how work can get done. The amoeba is changing ever more rapidly, and like an amoeba, an organization's primary mission is to survive; and to survive it must adapt. Will HR adapt? Will leaders adopt? Will you adapt? The choice is ours, and arguably, if HR doesn't lead the way it simply won't happen, and this would elevate the risk for all: the organization and its stakeholders, especially employees. Let's take charge. Let's lead.

*The post "***The Workforce of the Future: HR's Role in Managing the Amoeba***" *was first published by* **Al** **Adamsen** *here*
https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/workforce-future-hrs-role-managing-amoeba-al-adamsen/

## About Al Adamsen

Al is all about People Data for Good. He's a globally recognized thought leader, advisor, and educator in

the areas of People Analytics, Talent Strategy, Workforce Planning, Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion, Employee Engagement & Well-being, Ethics, Organizational Change, Digital Transformation, and the Future of Work. He's the Founder & CEO of the People Analytics & Future of Work (PAFOW) Community & Conference Series, a global network committed to promoting People Data for Good: the responsible and ethical use of people data, analytics, and artificial intelligence (AI) for the benefit of individuals, teams, groups, organizations, and society at large. While running PAFOW, Al co-founded Insight222, an organization committed to accelerating the positive impact People Analytics has in large enterprises. Before founding PAFOW, Al held leadership roles at Ernst & Young, Gap Inc., Inform (now SuccessFactors/SAP), and Kenexa (now IBM). Over his career, he's served clients such as Disney, Uber, McKesson, Boeing, Comcast, Heinz, Mayo Clinic, Stanford University, among many others. He and his content have been featured in leading magazines, webinars, podcasts, and learning content. He's also a frequent keynote speaker, host of the People Data for Good Podcast, and author of a host of models including the Talent Assessment & Development (TAD) Framework, an innovative approach to aligning individual development with educational, organizational, and societal development. In addition to his career pursuits, Al is an avid beach volleyball player and honored father of two outstanding young people. He and his family live in Santa Cruz, California.

Learn more about me personally at aladamsen.com

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