

Limited workforce supply? ...then reshape demand

by Andrew Simon

We've all seen the reams of data tables and charts predicting forthcoming shortages in people from certain demographic, skill or occupational groups.

While these graphs and charts do provide a useful macro view, they can paint a rather alarming talent supply horizon. As we all know, a blazing horizon can be blinding and distract from the job of finding alternative routes or sources. It can also engender a sense of awe and helplessness and a notion that the problem is too big and therefore beyond the capacity of the organisation to influence.

Supply side workforce economics can overshadow the possibilities and opportunities around the subtle but important task of re-conceiving demand and re-shaping work so that workforce supply becomes less of an intractable problem.

Re-thinking and re-designing work to advise organisational outcomes and goals in the context of current or even dwindling supply is part of the supply-demand equation that workforce plans should help calibrate and balance. Put another way, we can address some supply side issues if we first address the demand side of the equation.

When work is re-imagined and re-designed well, existing employees can be reinvigorated, potential new talent uncovered and different work configurations and resourcing arrangements made possible.

In short, we refresh, create and invent as we always have, new forms of supply to cope with our needs. The history of human survival, of human ideas, and of invention and technology clearly demonstrate our propensity and ability to successfully create the things that we need...as well as many things we don't!

Technology will undoubtedly continue to change the nature of work and this must be an area of attention for workforce planners, organisational developers and managers alike. Technology provides capacity to cope with some of the affects of limited workforce supply.

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However, there are some dimensions of work that are difficult for technology to replace and other dimensions that should perhaps be quarantined from potentially invasive and de-humanising technology. Re-imagining work from a workforce planning perspective should therefore also focus on areas where our humanness provides unequalled strength.

The cultural scientist, Geert Hofstede, suggests four elements within jobs that are best suited to direct human attention. These are:

- 1 jobs that deal with the setting of human and social outcomes, with defining the purpose of organisational life for individuals and groups. These jobs are to do with leadership and with managing groups of people
- 2 creative jobs concerned with inventing, with new ideas, concepts and things and subjecting them to criteria of usefulness, beauty, ethics and the public good

- 3 jobs that deal with unforeseeable circumstances such as safety, security, defence, business continuity and maintenance of quality
- 4 jobs with human contact as its essence. Supervision, entertainment keeping people company; listening to and helping people materially, spiritually, and motivating them to learn and to do remarkable things.

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thinking beyond the limitations and pessimism of supply side workforce economics.

Yet, we can use the ‘limited supply’ argument as a catalyst to re-imagine and re-design demand. To do so in a way that refreshes our current employees, sustains connectivity with dispersed talent and opens up new sources of workforce supply. And whilst at the same time, protect the basic, intrinsic value of meaningful, rewarding, humane work.

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