Working & Leading in the Networked, Digital Age

An interview with Alison Maitland, co-author of Future Work.

"Organizations that give their workers more control over their time, provide them with more autonomy and empower them to use their skills and knowledge will be the winners in the 21st century," predicts James S. Turley, chairman and CEO, Ernst & Young.

But how do managers and leaders and organizations make the shift to working in the networked digital age? Turley recommends *Future Work: How Businesses Can Adapt and Thrive in the New World of Work*.

Written by Alison Maitland and Peter Thomson, *Future Work* explains the factors that are driving changes in the nature of work, describes principles, skills and practices for managers and tells stories of executives and companies that are successfully adapting the way they work.

In a recent interview, Maitland shared an overview of *Future Work*.

CCL: Many factors go into what you call "Future Work." What are some highlights or key points about future work?

Maitland: Future work, as my co-author Peter Thomson and I describe it, is a way of working and of managing people that is fit for the networked, digital age. It is about giving people the environment, tools and information they need to do their job, setting them clear objectives, and then freeing them to achieve those in the way that works best for them, their team and the business. It is about measuring and rewarding people for their performance and outcomes, not the number of hours they work or their physical presence in a workplace. Unlike conventional flexible work arrangements, future work is led from the top as a business strategy, not just an HR strategy. It turns convention on its head by starting with the assumption that all jobs can have autonomy and flexibility, only restricting these where there are logical requirements to do certain tasks at a fixed location or specific time.

CCL: Your book is about the human side of the transition to future work. What is (or needs to be) different about leadership during this transition?

Maitland: Leaders are the key to organizations making this shift successfully or not. While the business case is powerful, change is often held back by a lack of leadership from the top or by managers' fears that they will lose control and status if they can no longer dictate where, when and how employees work.

However, there are already some great leaders of future work out there. They have understood that they have to examine their own attitudes and let go of their default "control" button. As one of them, Theo Rinsema of Microsoft Netherlands, told us: "We had to further develop our leadership style in order to unleash employee empowerment. To be capable of leading based on trust, we as leaders realized that we had to look at our personal development, especially our personal drivers and control mechanisms ?The balance between leading on the one hand and being a networked colleague on the other hand is crucial."

CCL: It seems future work requires new organizational cultures more than new policies. How do future work thinkers and leaders effect change on a large scale?

Maitland: Yes, culture is critical. We found that organizational cultures that encourage innovative working practices tend to be democratic, trusting and empowering, assume that employees are self-motivated, expect them to do the right thing and value creativity, initiative and individual accountability. Creating change on a large scale requires leaders to set an example, understand the business drivers, treat this as a strategic issue and communicate the need for change across the organization. There are usually pockets of good practice and pockets of resistance, so it is best to push first against the open doors.

CCL: What are the pros and cons of technology that allow us to be ever-connected?

Maitland: Technology is an essential tool, or enabler, of future work, as it gives us the ability to work anytime anywhere. However, without any simultaneous changes in the rules of work, technology can enslave rather than liberate us. We should recognize that technology itself is neither a hero nor a villain. It is how we use it, and who controls the "off" switch, that matters.

CCL: When flexibility is seen as benefitting the business, not just individual employees, more organizations will "get it." Make the business case for future work.

Maitland: There's no doubt that having flexibility benefits employees. However, when it is seen purely as a way to "accommodate" employees, flexibility gains less traction than when it is about the way the business as a whole operates. Our case study companies report a wide range of business benefits, including increased productivity, cost savings, more motivated employees, less risk of business disruption, faster response to market changes, extended customer service and improved employee communication.

CCL: It's easier to see flexibility and autonomy for knowledge workers than it is for factory workers, medical personnel, restaurant workers, etc. Give some examples of what future work can look like when specific hours must be staffed.

Maitland: Most jobs comprise different tasks — some may have to be done at a fixed place or time, others can be done anywhere. Health workers or police officers work in specific locations but also have paperwork that can be done remotely. Retail teams have to be on site, but they can still have some autonomy by managing their own schedules, rather than having these imposed by management. Self-scheduling seems to work best in small teams of 10-15 people, so big organizations should think about how to create smaller team environments — just as many of them seek to foster a spirit of entrepreneurialism.

CCL: Touch on your five principles for progress.

Maitland: We drew up five overarching "TRUST" principles for organizations to make a successful shift to future work. We've been told these are really helpful in rolling out change, because they are universal while allowing room for local implementation. The first principle is: Trust your people, because trust is at the heart of the relationship between employer and employee. The second, reward output not input, is crucial in shifting attitudes, as are the third and fourth principles — understand the business case for your organization, and start at the top, with senior executives leading the change. The fifth principle is: Treat people as individuals. Many organizations still impose a one-size-fits-all model of work. The successful future work leader understands how everyone in her or his team is different, what motivates them and how much support they need to get the best results.

CCL: CCL's new EMEA headquarters in Brussels was influenced by Future Work. You were there recently. What stood out to you about the space and how it seemed future work was playing out at CCL?

Maitland: It has plenty of spaces for collaborative work, which reflects the trend towards offices becoming meeting places rather than places for concentrated work that can often be done remotely. I was particularly interested in the six-month pilot that's taking place in one team whereby they can work wherever and whenever it suits them, as long as they produce the results. They don't need to come into the office. Some people find complete autonomy easier than others, and it's important to have a strong framework of clear objectives, regular communication and support for those who need to learn new ways of managing themselves.