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THE FUTURE IS NOW

Whether it's remote work, health and safety, or globalization, employers have much to consider about the not-so-distant future

Workplace 2021 is not as distant as it sounds. It is literally around the corner. But projecting today's concerns and challenges and seeing how they will influence decision-making for the workplace of tomorrow is key to meeting future needs in a current and post-pandemic world. To do so, *Your Workplace* Editor and Deputy Publisher Joel Kranc gathered some of Canada's top thought leaders around the virtual table to discuss future challenges and solutions. Seated at

the table were Jill Wagman, Managing Principal with Eckler; Sean Fitzpatrick, President of TalentMap; Mark Edgar, Founder of Goat Rodeo; Val Duffey, former CHRO with the Greater Toronto Airports Authority; and Ken Coates, Canada Research Chair in Regional Innovation at the John-son-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, University of Saskatchewan. The following is an edited transcript of their conversation about the future of the workplace.

The Panel



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JILL WAGMAN
Managing Principal
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What are the biggest challenges facing Canadian workplaces in 2021 and how should they be overcome?

JILL: The big change is going to be a desire for more remote working. Virtually all of our employees, except for a really small handful, have indicated that going forward they want to spend at least a couple of days a week working from home, which was not the norm for us. And so, the challenge is how do we preserve our culture and how do we make sure that our relationships are as rich and fulfilling as they are today?

We've all been working together and have known each other for a while, but when you start onboarding new people, you have less and less contact with one another in person. So, for us, the question is how do we preserve our culture? We want to offer the flexibility that our people want. We are doing well. We've proven we can work remotely with very little impact to our business, so there's no reason to not offer that flexibility and work-life balance. At the same time, we also have a strong and bonding culture that we don't want to sacrifice. So that's the challenge.

Do you see that as a permanent fixture so that remote work is always part of it, or is it phased out after some point?

JILL: I know some of our people would love for it to be a permanent part of their life, particularly those with young families or long commutes. It has lifted a real burden from them. Some people were driving an hour to get into the office.

SEAN: People are familiar with walking next door, running into someone in the hallway, at the water cooler, in the elevator to talk about a project or an initiative. We don't have a way to replicate it in a more remote environment. For example, if I want to talk to someone on our team, because we are all remote working now, you have to schedule this meeting and have a video Zoom call or a phone call.

It feels stifling on the creative side. So, I think that's going to be one of the biggest challenges—the creativity—and serendipity that comes out of these day-to-day interactions that happen.

We've proven we can work remotely with very little impact to our business, so there's no reason to not offer that flexibility and work-life balance.

JILL WAGMAN

VAL: I believe the shared societal experience of pandemic is creating a fundamental, very organic reset of the world of work. Many elements of the reset were already contemplated and underway, but some, like physical distancing and PPE for example, are germane to the pandemic. The biggest challenge I see facing organizations is to let go of the past and embrace the reset.

We've really raised the bar with how we've responded to the pandemic and, more recently to the anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism movement.

The challenge will be to rewire the organization so that bar stays high. When the crisis took over, we collectively rose to the occasion. We put the health and safety of employees first, we showed deep caring for people, we supported their mental health and accommodated new boundaries between family and work. We committed to doing more and doing better to address social inequities, and we supported our communities with "organizationally selfless" gestures of support. And we flexed a muscle that a lot of organizations didn't even know they had, in terms of crisis management, resilience and agility.

The winners are going to be the organizations that figure out how to take the best of the crisis response and use it as a platform to catapult forward. Many of the big thinkers are saying that we're 10 years ahead of where we otherwise would have been in terms of future of work. So, let's keep going.

Is there the mentality of “let’s get back to how things were” when things get calmer and the health and safety concerns have been addressed?

VAL: If there is, we're holding onto a false sense of security. Listen, human

We have to start taking about the potential of a lost generation. And by that I don't mean a 25-year cohort of people but maybe two or three years worth of people. They have had the worst high school experience in the last 100 years, and next year will be mostly online. Those students are going to flop like fish out of water when they get to university or college. And the challenges facing these people will likely percolate through the system for several years.

Also, small businesses (under 50 workers) are a key part of the employment system in Canada. They don't have HR departments, they don't have

The biggest challenge will be ensuring organizations can adapt to this scale and volume of disruption.

MARK EDGAR

beings are wired for equilibrium, so of course we want to go back to where it's comfortable and safe. But I truly believe that we've organically stumbled upon some really exciting new ways of working—that, when we look back on this moment in time, we will have identified some very virtuous aspects of working remotely, of digitizing our customer experience and our employee experience, and of bringing a more social consciousness to our organizations.

KEN: I think transitions are important. We were already struggling to keep up with the kind of changes that were occurring and now the pandemic has both accelerated a whole bunch of issues and created some new opportunities. And we can do things we didn't think we could do. It's really interesting to watch how many companies are rethinking how much office space they need and what's going to happen to downtown regions in the near future. Big cities are actually in real crisis now, because there's nobody working there, and it is not clear that people want to go back.

wellness coordinators, they don't have onboarding processes that are more than an afternoon's worth of work and workforce preparation. If I watch what's going on with the COVID crisis in Canada, we have done many things well, but not for small businesses.

Small businesses feel abandoned. They are closing down. Strategies that help small business as opposed to medium and large-sized businesses are currently inadequate in Canada.

MARK: I'm an optimist by nature, but I think it's worth noting that we're not actually through this pandemic yet and so it's worth thinking about the impact of a second wave.

It is also important to think about the shift of expectations of employees. For example, people are focused on their health and safety and their own well-being when it comes to returning to the office. It will be interesting to see if people develop a much stronger sense of purpose in the work they're doing.

Lots of relevant challenges have been identified, so I think it is fair to say that the biggest challenge will be ensuring



organizations can adapt to this scale and volume of disruption.

What does corporate culture look like in 2021?

SEAN: A lot of companies are going to end up with a hybrid model—a hub where you come in and socialize and connect with others for maybe two to three days a week, where you're actually physically at a location. The rest of the time you work flex hours or remotely.

For other companies that have, say, offices in downtown Toronto, they'll probably have remote hubs—maybe in Mississauga for those in the west, maybe in Markham for those in the north—and people actually come into those locations, which is a shorter commute than all the way downtown, to collaborate and get that social bonding. Because mental health is a really big concern, more people are requesting mental health support, and mental health calls have gone up significantly. So, the connection to other people is important, and how do you do that?



Do you think it creates a fragmented cultural experience for workers?

SEAN: It is happening anyway. You go into a company or a culture, and you have all these subcultures. TalentMap works a lot with Saskatchewan Polytechnic, for example, and they have the North Saskatchewan campus and the South, and they talk about the different cultures at both of those locations. Fragmented cultures happen. The employer is going to recognize how to create a bit of a hub but also make it easy for people to come in and give them flexibility.

JILL: We've been around for over 93 years, and we've always talked about culture and taken great pride in fostering a culture where everyone feels like they belong. We went through an exercise last year to define our purpose and rearticulate our core values. Fortunately, the timing was perfect. This was such a valuable exercise because, now that we're remote and working from a distance, we've been really hanging our hat on our purpose and core values.

With every message we write, or virtual interaction we have, we're relying on the purpose and values to inform us on how to behave, how to treat one another and really what is important to us. We keep rearticulating our purpose. One of the biggest changes for us is that we are communicating so much more with one another and with our employees than we had in the past.

It's helped preserve some of that cultural feel of how we do things and how we behave. It will continue to be a challenge if we don't have enough opportunities to connect face-to-face.

Would you recommend to other companies to re-evaluate their purpose?

JILL: It was a really powerful exercise for us. So I would recommend it. We started at the leadership level, and it was through a facilitated storytelling exercise that we pieced together what we thought our purpose was. Then, we switched over and went ground up and

Culture is a mirror, not a picture. I think our work now is to take a close look at what that mirror is reflecting, because I suspect some of it is new.

VAL DUFFEY

did it with a subgroup of our staff.

Thankfully, there was nice synergy and alignment between leadership and our employee representatives. In fact, both groups, independent from each other, agreed on our true purpose. I say it was a powerful exercise because with the storytelling approach it was very emotional. It was very personal, there were tears, there was laughter. It was just a fabulous exercise to go through.

SEAN: The whole COVID thing forced a lot of things that happen below the surface to rise to the top. We've never met these circumstances before, so it probably is an excellent time to re-evaluate. If you do it regularly, every couple of years, re-evaluating is really good. Not a lot of companies do that. This is the time to do it.

VAL: It is great news for organizations that have a very strong foundation in terms of values and purpose—where there were virtues, those have been exaggerated. But it is also true that where there were cracks, those have also been exaggerated. One of the fundamental paradigm shifts around culture is that we've been under the illusion that we've been creating and shaping culture at the boardroom table and then “rolling it out” across the organization. But that was always an illusion—we never had that kind of top-down control. Cultures are co-created. And yes, the more senior the leader, the more reach and impact he or she has on that creation process—and so a shared mindset is the precursor to that creation process. But culture is a mirror, not a picture. I think our work now is to take a close look at what that mirror is reflecting, because I suspect some of it is new.

Many companies are reporting unprecedented levels of engagement. Productivity hasn't taken the hit we feared it would. People have been doing the right things. If culture is how people behave when no one's looking, well, no one's been looking for the last few months, and for the most part people have been showing up very well.

SEAN: The biggest challenge that we see in organizations is the mid-level managers and having some way to help drive, support and encourage performance, whether it's KPIs or performance

management system. The bums in seats or face time is going to decline and they don't necessarily have the skills or the capability to be able to manage [their team at] that level. The support systems really need a lot of work.

MARK: It might be necessary for some organizations to adapt their cultures to the changing external environment. I don't think it's too late for organizations to make these changes if their culture hasn't held up during the crisis, but I recognize that will be difficult if everyone is working remotely. If you are creative in how you approach the change, you can create the artefacts and the other elements of your culture. You will need to be very deliberate, but it's important to ensure you've got the right culture in place then to continue to thrive.

What are you seeing as a trend that will impact the future?

JILL: The obvious one is the use of video conferencing. We were on the cusp of rolling it out. [There are] some naysayers, of course. The “I don't want to be on camera” kind of people. I do think that, as much as we're all definitely experiencing Zoom fatigue, video conferencing should continue. It will be important in situations where people can't physically be present. At least they can be visually present.

I do feel there is a real positive that will come from continuing with remote working. And that will be the ability to recruit and retain top talent. It means we can hire people in rural communities, and they don't have to physically come into Toronto, Montreal or another large urban centre. They can stay and work from their community with the use of video and some other techniques. It will really open opportunities for those that are not in the business hubs where most financial services workplaces are located.

MARK: There's actually an argument that remote work can help improve inclusion if it's done in a thoughtful way.

In terms of trends, we have to challenge ourselves to understand them. If we don't, we can't plan. Planning seems to have become very unfashionable.

People are increasingly working on a very short-term cycle, feeling that they can adapt to situations, which you're not going to be able to do if you don't look at the trends, do some scenario planning and really think them through in detail.

We've seen this huge trend around globalization, and I could see that reversing, as people start to think about their local supply chains. Consider, for example, the challenges we've had securing PPE.

Organizations that have a high level of trust between their management and their employees are doing really well.

KEN COATES

What about from the HR point of view? How does globalization affect or change the way you do work and the way you look at your attraction and retention issues?

MARK: Globalization overlaps with remote working and is a good example of where you need to look at the intersection of different trends. It creates the opportunity to access more talent, but you'll also need to think about salary differentials. You've potentially got the same work being paid at different rates because the rates are tied to the local market. As a result, employers will need to think through the implications of this on their resource strategy.

What about pensions and benefits for workers in various locations?

JILL: Geographically, there will be challenges if there is more gig-type work, especially when you're delivering

pensions and benefits. The whole pension/benefits delivery model is up in the air a bit, and we're exploring other models rather than the traditional model—it's really been designed for full-time salaried employees who stay with one employer for a long time, sometimes even their entire career. Whereas now it's looking at how to let an employee have coverage and then be able to have that coverage follow them around. So, maybe it's a model where the coverage is attached to the employee rather than to the employer.

There is a lot of stress, tension and scars going on besides just the pandemic. How does that influence attitudes toward work in 2021?

VAL: If adversity is the greatest teacher then 2020 will go down as teaching us some of our greatest lessons. There's no longer a divide between the organization and the rest of society—these phenomena are not happening “out there.” They are happening within every shape and size of workplace—and they are very humbling and humanizing equalizers for all of us. We cannot look away from one another anymore. We know we are frail in the face of a killer disease. We are conscious about how dependent we are on the essential workers who risk their health for ours. We see the disgrace and the inequities of living conditions for our seniors and working conditions for the most vulnerable. We watch the videos in horror and witness the indignities faced by racialized and indigenous Canadians.

These things have been around for generations, and we're shining a light on some very dark and awkward places. The good news is that we are talking about them in the mainstream. Now that they are seeing the light of day, organizations

are responding—with new levels of humility and new commitments to make things right. I hold a very optimistic view of the human condition. I do think we're raising the bar, and I believe we will do better.

MARK: I am concerned that there might be a shift to self-protection compared to “we're all in this together.” It's justifiable, but this creates polarization as there are many other people who have become much kinder, which is fantastic. For example, if you consider something like mask wearing, and the responsibility we have to be good, kind citizens, we still see people not wearing masks, which suggests to me people looking out for themselves. It's important to take the time to understand other people's perspectives and to keep an open mind.

KEN: We don't know what the scars are; it's way too soon. We do not know what's going to break and what's going to work. This is a real test of national ability, organizational ability and personal ability. We have done relatively well as a country so far, but I'd add a few things. When you have a crisis like this, historically people end up with a real fear of the future, because you don't know if there's another one coming. We don't know how we're going to live with the fact that we may always have this disease or other diseases.

We also are going to see a real acceleration of national differences. Some countries will succeed, and some will not succeed. So, the real question is, which trajectory are we on? Are we on the Japan, Israel, Finland line, or are we on the United States and China line, in terms of countries that are running into challenges? I wish I could be more optimistic; I'm just not. [Also] we had a surge of government support that was completely unprecedented in history. The unwillingness of people to try and get back to work has really said some not



nice things about Canadians' sense of entitlement.

How are employers helping with mental health, and what should they be doing more of in terms of the programs they offer?

JILL: Most employers who offer employee assistance programs (EAP) give employees access to mental health resources. What we have been doing for our employees is just re-emphasizing the availability of the EAP and reminding them how to access it. It's certainly not the end-all and be-all, and we're not mental health professionals, but we want our people to know they have resources available to them.

We are encouraging a lot of personal interactions (albeit remotely) and having very open and honest conversations with our employees. We reach out routinely to make sure that, for example, they end their day at a reasonable hour and don't go back on their computer at night. We are really trying to draw the line between home and work for them. We just keep connecting to remind them where to find the resources but, more importantly, that we are available to talk.

It's important to note, as well, that the pandemic is impacting people very differently. We have a four-generation workforce, and the issues and situations

are as diverse as the people. There is the very young person who lives in a 500-square-foot condo on the 25th floor who is suffering greatly from loneliness and lack of being outdoors. Then there are the young families with children running around and they can't get their work done. There are so many different stressors. As employers, we need to keep acknowledging that and encouraging them to speak up if they can't get their work done. One of the things I think will help is having a lighter management touch. We should focus on results, cut them some slack and acknowledge that if they are having challenges it's OK and they don't have to be at 100% all the time.

Is there such a thing as business model resilience? How can companies achieve that when they move into 2021?

SEAN: Absolutely. You're seeing that both with some companies in Canada and some companies around the world—they're remaining successful and they've been able to adapt and absorb the COVID situation. Others have really struggled. Their line industry has really struggled, but you have got to think about more than just the model. If you're a digital organization, if you're a knowledge-based organization, it's very different—you

can work in these environments. If you are moving people around physically and people don't want to move anywhere, that's a real challenge. So how do you change?

It is dependent on the industry. You can have a lot of organizations and senior leaders put protocols in place, standards in place for how they deal with unknowns that are going to be coming. Whether it's another disease, or some other major catastrophe, this has taught organizations a lot of really good lessons and they started to think about their emergency preparedness plan. They often have one because of certain standards, whether you are lean or ISO, but they never really had to implement one.

MARK: It would be hard for any organization to guarantee that they have created full resilience in their business, but it's an ambition worth working toward. There will be a lot of elements to think through including how diversified their business is.

It is also valuable to consider the qualities and capabilities that the organization has to adapt to these different situations. Thinking that through in the right way requires a deliberate approach and a lot of imagination around scenario planning.

VAL: The pandemic has taught us that we really cannot anticipate every circumstance. This has been a true black swan event. What we can do is build up the immune systems of our organizations. In much the same way as we build up our own immunity in terms of our health and well-being with things like good nutrition, exercise, sleep and lifestyle choices, we can do the same in organizations, with critical capabilities and conscious mindsets.

It's about letting go of old assumptions and building the capacity and agility to innovate and thrive in an ambiguous context. It's about building organizational capabilities based on technical, social and emotional literacy. To the extent that organizations have fared well over the last few months, it's because they have these things in their DNA. And the organizations that do not have those reserves to draw upon need to make investments if they plan to continue to pivot and thrive through this



We've seen a lot of leaders sit back and start to think about their leadership style in this COVID period.

SEAN FITZPATRICK

current crisis and any next wave that comes our way.

KEN: This is the Olympics of resilience. We are going to figure out who wins and who doesn't. There are a few gold medals and a lot of 45th-place finishes as well. Number one, the complacency is over. It was already weakened, but the future is now very uncertain.

[Also] we thought that the digital transition was fast. But what is happening now is way faster. I'm amazed at the scale of opportunity that a crisis like this has created, opportunities that people never imagined. Those companies that are resilient and creative are better than they ever thought they would be.

What kind of tactics should employers take to approach the workplace as a generational issue?

VAL: I'll be bold here and say I think generations are something we should probably put to one side. The generations filter is a blunt instrument that is flawed with some very big generalizations. There are new filters, like family

status, living situation, health status and the type of work one does, that are going to be important going forward. The employee experience needs to be a bespoke employee experience, full stop. What is incumbent on the organization is that we meet people where they are at and we create systems that are flexible enough for people to work, contribute and thrive on new terms.

We need to create new approaches—digitized systems, talent platforms, employee experience offerings—that allow people to step in on their individualized terms and work to their optimum. Generations is an old idea.

JILL: We won't be approaching post-COVID generationally, we will be approaching it personally. We have no intention of requiring anybody to go back before they feel comfortable and safe. That could be for a variety of reasons. They may be older, they may have other vulnerabilities we do not know about, or maybe their home situation is different than others. The post-COVID approach to the workplace for us is going to be on a very personal level.

MARK: We've been very lazy about generational labels for so long, so it is encouraging that as leaders we're advocating for a better approach. It's worth noting that the personalization of the employee experience is going to be a hugely challenging thing to actually create for organizations, particularly when they're looking to keep things simple to control costs. This creates a tension that we will have to work through.

SEAN: It is a pretty blunt instrument. But it is still an instrument, and you can sometimes use it, but generally where you are at in your life cycle matters. [For] a lot of younger people who do not have children, what we've noticed in the data is loneliness, not being able to socialize. Working is the big problem. They are in small apartments or condos

or, unless they go home to their parents' place, in the suburbs.

The other big issue that has come up in the data is child care. There is no solution to the child care problem yet. It's probably the biggest concern other than the loneliness that I mentioned for the younger population.

How do you get people on board for the new workforce in the best and most efficient way?


KEN: We are seeing the fundamental value of trust. Organizations that have a high level of trust between their management and their employees are doing very well.

Organizations that do not have that trust are really top-down, arrogant, domineering kinds of organizations [and] are really having trouble keeping control. You must build fundamental and continuous trust, and you need constant engagement.

JILL: I agree 100% that it is all about trust, and one of the things we've learned very early is that it's OK to tell our employees that we don't know when we're going back. We are keeping them in the loop. Month after month, it is good news.

When I look at 2021, I wish I had a crystal ball, because I just cannot imagine what 2021 will look like.

We keep engaging our people through small surveys and then feeding them back the results and letting them know what we can and can't commit to, and we have been helping our clients do the same thing—for example, Eckler's remote working policy.

We haven't committed to anything yet, but we have acknowledged that most want to work remotely at least part of the time, and we're taking that into consideration as we plan the way forward. We know, without a doubt, that we must be more flexible. 

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Roundtable

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