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Are we ready to address the new expectations of work and workers in the transforming world of work?

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Sounding Board

Are we ready to address the new expectations of work and workers in the transforming world of work?

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1. Background

The world of work is transforming. Where work is performed, who performs work or has the right to work is changing. Along with these changes workers are experiencing shifts in the knowledge needed to work, the dissolving of contracted benefits, and the disappearance of traditional opportunities for work such as in manufacturing. Moreover, there are many influences that shape what workers can do, are expected to do, what they can expect from work and the types of work they can expect to do in the future. Some of these changes give rise to new meanings of work or what it means to be productive within a society or community.

Currently, some of the factors shaping the world of work and its situated nature include global shifts in the economy, mandatory retirement changes, the growing number of immigrant

or older or migrant workers, the offshoring of work from one country to another, and the discourses about future work possibilities (e.g. the demise of manufacturing in the western world, unemployment as a common phenomenon and the emergence and acceptance of service work or knowledge work as the norm). In developed countries one of the most common problems is that global shifts in the economy and the discourse in the popular media about high rates of unemployment raise the expectation of unemployment not only for young people but, also for current workers across all employment sectors. We have even seen the emergence of disparaging or marginalizing lexicons used to describe workers such as discouraged workers [1], undocumented workers, alien workers or injured workers.

Workers today can expect more periods of intermittent work disruption and disengagement as part of their employment trajectory due to the unpredictability and unstable global economies. Unemployment is not new, however what is new is the anticipation of unemployment as an expected part of work life and the rise in the numbers of people from all employment sectors that will experience unemployment. The shift in the availability of work or lack of work has many important consequences for governments, employment insurance programs, labour organizations and for workers. For example, many workers have not previously approached employment with the view of considering and anticipating the need to plan for intermittent or prolonged periods of work disruption. In turn, more people will likely use or rely on unemployment types of benefits during their working years. On the more positive side, workers today can also expect to experience a variety of occupational settings and types of work. The variation in workplaces and experiences will help workers build their potential and capacity to be ready to make shifts into new types of work – a valuable skill set and employment trajectory essential to maintain their future employability.

Workers in developing countries are experiencing different types of work expectations due to increases in employment opportunities based on the relocating of manufacturing and telemarketing sectors. Accessing new types of work can also increase unforeseen health risks for these workers. For instance, there is a rise in workplace stress in some developing countries. Mental health problems are emerging due to stress and anxiety experienced within the telemarketing sector and / or having to live away from family while working and living in urban centres where work is located [2].

Given the changing nature of work and its situatedness, how can the journal WORK and our epistemic community[3] begin to respond to the challenges that coincide with the burgeoning work transformations across the globe? What are the priorities of workplaces and needs of workers in the new economy or world of work.? How can our knowledge base help labour organizations and employers maintain health and safety and injury prevention or even promote health for workers? For instance, what knowledge can support the productivity of older workers or address under or over employment – too few people doing too much work and others not enough to do? How can our knowledge base help workplaces and health professionals stay abreast of new work demands or worker assessments needed to address the needs of workers in the finance or knowledge sectors? How can our knowledge base about new occupations such as digital work help rehabilitation professionals in enabling work competence and potential for workers with chronic illnesses?

In the past, the richness of the discourse and contribution of WORK has emphasized the advancement of knowledge and evidence to support interventions and approaches to prevent problems, to support the assessment of work performance, productivity, safety, workplace health

and to maximize efficiencies in work transitions through rehabilitation [3]. However, I believe that this journal can also encourage the dissemination of new knowledge and help to direct research on current issues relevant to work and its transformation in society. New knowledge on the transformation of work could be shared through the work transitions column as well as through research publications and case studies. This knowledge can equip the community of work practice to address the needs of workers to meet the changing nature of work demands and workplace expectations.

On a global level, the transformation of work and the pervasiveness of the unemployment experience across the globe calls for critical dialogue and critical social perspectives. Critical perspectives are needed to understand the source of occupational injustices[4] and examine the change processes to support adoption of new work opportunities and the changing expectations of work on workers, workplaces and communities. For instance, at the macro level the dialogue needs to be on the identification of types of work/employment shifts, the use of theories and knowledge to prevent occupational injustices associated with unemployment, and the use of interprofessional knowledge that can foster innovations in labour policies, education, training, transitional supports and job creation toward sustainable employment opportunities.

Dialogue and research is also needed within epistemic communities of work practice such as in human factors and work productivity, vocational or career planning and / or the prevention of work injuries or work rehabilitation. For instance, we need to research new tools that can assess and evaluate work demands or worker resources in new areas. One example is the emergence of and continuous transformation of technology as a new means for the way people are expected to work or when they work. Important for work practice professionals is to provide

knowledge on how to equip groups of people to adapt and optimize their capabilities for using technology in workplaces.

There is also a need to publish knowledge that can address the emerging needs of employers and workers who are entering into new employment sectors accompanied by new types of work procedures, equipment or knowledge as well as the pressure to constantly change, adjust, and adapt work processes to stay viable. Further to this we need to know more about the nature and impact of frequent work transitions into and out of work and back into work on work productivity and worker health and wellbeing. At the same time as the work practice community can assist in knowledge to support the transformation of work we also need to provide leadership to identify opportunities for inclusive participation of citizens. We need to support inclusion in new types of work that reduce work disparities and prevent further marginalization and deprivation of vulnerable persons such as youth, older workers, women, immigrants, and persons with disabilities. For instance, we need to bring to light the skills sets of persons with disabilities and forefront their capacity for becoming employed within workplaces that have high technology demands as well as demonstrate how technology use in performing work increases opportunities for persons with disabilities to obtain employment.

2. Developing research directions.

In this sounding board I offer an example of how researchers and epistemic communities in the work field might begin to ask questions and develop focused research and knowledge generation in interdisciplinary teams that may be relevant to addressing work transformation issues with a context. This paper is by no means comprehensive but can be used as a starting point to identify priorities for exploration by researchers, professionals and policy makers in supporting work transitions for workers and employers. I propose that we begin to ask critical questions in three

areas, demographic shifts, trends in the types of available work within a context and the prevention of occupational injustices. The following questions or inquiry processes can help to define a social problem relevant to work transformations. They can assist researchers to target the source of problems such as power or resource inequities and lead to an interdisciplinary program of research focused on uncovering the complexity of and the source of problems, and to generate, through research, knowledge that can address solutions and / or action.

These questions emerged in developing a research plan for addressing the larger social problems that arise from the transforming world of work in the Canadian context. The underlying approach that we used was to start with identifying *What is a large social problem relevant to the transformation of work within the Canadian context for which there is a gap in knowledge needed to provide policy or solutions for addressing change?*. The social problem was subsequently defined by an interdisciplinary network of researchers and in our case we identified the following question: *How can workplaces prepare for the inclusion of older workers with hearing loss who need or want to remain in productive work occupations?* This social problem was defined through the examination of the demographic shifts and potential work imbalances and disparities, the current employment trends and the review of occupational injustices. Examples of answers or issues raised through this inquiry are provided following each section. This process is not necessarily a linear process however we did start with demographic shifts. Other groups may start with any of these areas and work through them before defining what social problem or need they will focus on in their research.

2.1 Questions to guide the examination of demographic shifts that impact worker capacity.

These questions were used to prompt dialogue and discussion amongst an interdisciplinary group of researchers from occupational therapy, occupational science, hearing science and human factors. What are the current and future demographic shifts in the worker population? Who are the different groups of future workers? What are the characteristics and skill sets of these workers and their capacity to change to meet changing workplace demands? What is the readiness of workers and workplaces to support these workers in maintaining work performance and in developing new occupational skills? What is it that employers need to support workers to maintain work competence? How, if at all, are communities or governments supporting human resource development through training or job placement models or enterprise development or inclusive incentives to support the changing needs of workplaces and worker capacity?

2.1.1 Case example of older workers in Canada.

The above questions lead to the following key points as part of defining the social problem of future workers. In Canada, an example of a current demographic shift is older workers. In 2011, workers between the ages of 65-69 represented 11.8% of all workers[5]. Worker data estimates also suggest that in 2021, 20% of the workforce will be over the age 55. One of the chronic and potentially disabling conditions of older workers is hearing loss. Currently, the average age of onset of hearing loss is 51 and half of Canadians over the age of 65 reports that they have a hearing loss [6]. Studies show that many older workers with hearing loss withdraw early from work due the stigma and fear of job loss if they disclose a hearing problem [7,8]. Other research indicates that working with hearing loss is fatiguing making it difficult to maintain optimal work performance[8].

As researchers and clinicians we also know that there are few tools to help workplaces make environments more hearing accessible. We were unable to find information on how workplaces evaluated the compatibility of new equipment or work processes with hearing demands and those with hearing loss. We were also unable to find specific ways that communities or governments were addressing the needs of older workers in the workplace who have hearing loss. These findings helped us begin to consider a focus for our research and the need to inform policy or resources to improve hearing accessibility.

2.2 Examine trends in work.

We explored issues of the types of work that would continue to be available to older workers. We began with examining what jobs within a context are at high risk for disappearing or becoming obsolete and what types of jobs will remain. To do this we looked at futurist research and predictions on employment trends of new jobs or work sectors within the Canadian context. Further, we identified economic shifts in types of work sectors available in the context, and the sustainability of work re temporary versus sustainable. Next, we identified potential sources of social, public or labour policy changes that may be precursors of immediate and long term change. We also asked who benefits or gains by these changes and who then experiences work disparities?

We attempted to list new or emerging workplace expectations for skills and capacities for new types of work and the gaps in information. We identified changes in expectations for where work will be located e.g., in physical or virtual places and we considered new types of equipment or knowledge that workers will be expected to use and become competent in performing in these

new workspaces. Last, we asked what do we need to know to support workers in developing or adopting new ways of working and interacting with work objects and equipment?

2.2.1 Case example of trends

Canada has experienced, like other countries, the loss of manufacturing and telemarketing. Further examples of other work at risk of disappearing include, General Office Clerk, Knitters/weavers, Photo processors, Actors, fish processors, plastics assemblers, greenhouse labourers, jeweler and Machine operators (as assessed by Canadian Business Magazine using Statistics Canada data base).

Future job predictions in Canada, by Canadian Living (www.Canadianliving.com), identified the top ten jobs that are likely to remain viable over the next decade or two: financial managers, skilled trade persons, college school teacher, dentist, computer information systems manager, University Professor, Human Resources Specialist or Manager, Pharmacists, Registered Nurses and Retail Managers. Other trends from a labour or policy perspective included the repeal of mandatory retirement, decline in defined benefits, less people having access to medical or health benefits, reduction in retirement security, and increases in productivity due to the use of technology. For instance, in 2011 Canada's Federal Court released its decision that the mandatory retirement exemption of the Canadian Human Rights Act unequivocally violates the equality provisions of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. For older workers they gain in access to employment but may not have access to required medical support for hearing devices. Employers gain in that they do not incur costs of having to hire new people if technology improves productivity and older workers remain in the workplace. Some of these trends reinforce the need of older workers to remain at work for those that do not have any benefits.

Many of the jobs of the future will be service or knowledge to others; and workers will need to interact with the public or other workers who also may be aging with hearing loss. Thus, communication is a critical skill in service and knowledge work for people who age at work. Further, with increases in the number of persons expected to experience hearing loss that remain at work, the need for information and knowledge to support this cohort of workers to age and maintain health and productivity at work is expected to grow over the next twenty years. Evaluation of workplaces to support accessibility needs of persons with hearing loss is indicated along with the types of strategies that persons with hearing loss can use to support their performance and potential to work productively in these jobs [8]. Equipment advances such as digital technologies need to be evaluated for the compatibility of those with hearing loss and such processes need to occur proactively rather than retrospectively in the workplace. These trends highlighted the need for developing tools to meet the needs of current and future older workers with hearing loss

2.3 Examine occupational injustices to study the prevention of injustices.

An occupational justice framework can be used to identify potential areas of injustice or to elaborate on social problems that create inequities or disparities for groups of workers as a result of some of the emerging trends and demographic shifts. Uncovering the source of injustices or the processes that lead to injustices is central to inform areas for solutions. The four occupational injustices in the framework [9] include occupational deprivation, marginalization, alienation and imbalance.

Occupational deprivation occurs due to external forces beyond the control of workers (geographical location of work, bands on industries such as fishing quotas or moratoriums, the

offshoring or moving of companies from one community to another, labour and environmental policies) that limit access to work for groups of workers for extended time periods. Workers experiencing work loss due to factors beyond their control can become work disengaged. Further manifestations include the lack of work and financial resources that precludes them from participating in a realm of diverse human occupations such as civic, sports, leisure, or social. Such injustices in turn increase health problems and lowers overall psychological wellbeing as well as changes current and future possibilities for participating in society. Prolonged loss of work also decreases work confidence and overall work competence as work skills are not routinely practiced. On an individual level lack of work decreases self-worth and engagement in activities.

Occupational deprivation [10] can be a very pervasive injustice within communities. For instance, at a community level, the long lengths of time groups of persons are unemployed can lead to the community itself in becoming stigmatized as a community comprised of a lack of skilled workers. This outcome may limit the number of new companies from starting up new enterprises within work disengaged communities. Further to this, prolonged unemployment of groups of workers within communities can have a downward and cascading effect on the local economy and lead to decreased income of others. Thus, the examination of factors contributing to and the types of consequences of occupational deprivation may help to elaborate on major social problems that, in part, can be addressed through research to prevent disengagement and negative impact on the health and wellbeing of groups of workers within communities.

Occupational marginalization [9,11] can arise when workers are limited in choices of available work. Lack of employment choices can lead to groups of workers who are continually limited from working within communities and lead to lower quality of life, lower health and

wellbeing and reliance on social supports. When a person lacks choice this can lead to their subsequent uptake or participation in activities in contexts to survive that separates them from others in society [10] or it limits the possibilities that are considered as attainable or suitable [11]. Lack of choice in occupational opportunities examined by Molineux and Whiteford in 1999 can be applied to those who lack choices regarding productive work occupations. Thus, lack of employment choices within an historical, geographical or social political context can lead to persons taking on work that is less than desired and that may be characterized as unsafe, or restricts their freedom in where and when they work, or invades their privacy, or to work in areas that lack social interaction with others, or has less benefits or supports needed to provide for needs of the family, or is less structured and unpredictable in terms of regular income.

Occupational imbalance arises when external forces support groups of workers who experience over employment or underemployment. Again these injustices lead to inequities that can inadvertently create work disparities for persons in society. For instance, the repeal of mandatory retirement increases the right of older workers to remain working and contributing to society, yet it also leads to underemployment of youth and new graduates who cannot find employment opportunities as older adults remain in the workforce. Delayed entrance into the workforce also decreases the development of work skills of youth.

Occupational alienation is an injustice premised on the importance of the meaning of work to workers[9]. In particular it is about workers' right to participate in meaningful work. When people do not participate in work that is meaningful to them in their social or lived context they can become alienated from the meaning attached to the work or working. This lack of valued work may in turn have consequences for workers that experience decreased work competence, loss of skills, presenteeism on the job, as well as work disengagement etc. The loss

of the valuing of work as a means of contributing collectively as in a familial oriented culture [12] or as a means to independence in individualistic-centric cultures [13] can lead to worker disengagement from work i.e., the lack of belief in achieving goals for work or lack of belief in being able to find work and make a meaningful contribution to society or the belief that work will not ever become available in the geographical place where one resides. Thus, one area of focus in the current transformation of work in the world is the prevention of widespread occupational alienation as it can lead to broad numbers of workers who become disinterested in participating in work. Similar to other injustices occupational alienation can foster perceptions about the lack of a viable workforce within a community or area. Work disengagement on a societal level can make it difficult to attract potential employers or promote economic development if the available human resource is disengaged with out-of-date skills and work experience.

2.3.1 Case example preventing occupational injustices

Prevention of injustices for older workers with hearing loss in Canada in our research focused on preventing work disengagement manifested by occupational marginalization and alienation. Our research group identified that persons with hearing loss lack choices in where they can work given the lack of hearing accessible workplaces. Also, workers with hearing loss experience fatigue and presenteeism that can lead to early disengagement from work, loss of access to needed benefits etc. Thus, our group felt that there was a need to merge universal design principles and an occupational perspective on what and how people conduct their work in workplaces to promote the assessment of barriers that make it difficult for persons to hear and communicate [14]. Also there is a need to synthesize knowledge on strategies that can be used to optimize the ease of hearing and reduce fatigue and facilitate communication for everyone in a

workplace, especially those who have hearing loss or will have in the future. Employers as well as workers need knowledge on solutions and strategies that they can put into place thus increasing choices for older workers in choosing to remain in the workplace but also to support them in conducting work that is meaningful. For instance, in Ontario a province in Canada, the Ontarians with Disability Act [15] has identified standards for accessibility that will require public sector work places to comply to make Ontario a place where persons with disabilities can live and work. The development of our Universal guideline for hearing [8] can serve to help prevent work disengagement through tailoring strategies to improve hearing accessibility in workplaces.

3. Way forward for the study of work transformations

Consideration of the impact of the changing nature of work requires a move toward more futuristic thinking about consequences for future workers. Work is by nature complex; however the study of work transformation and its situated nature further underscores the need for more interprofessional approaches and cross cultural studies[4] that can focus on the prevention of occupational injustices for workers and employers. One way that this can be achieved is through research teams identifying potential social problems that arise for groups of workers or workplaces within communities and targeting areas for change to prevent injustices from occurring. An example was offered in this Sounding Board as a platform for others to build upon. WORK is an appropriate journal to publish knowledge that can effect change in the workplace for both current and future workers. I believe that we need to focus more on the implications of our current research on the needs of future workers' health, wellbeing and their engagement in

work, as well as improving the future inclusivity of both workers and workplaces in the transforming world of work. Perhaps the next social problem we might consider is unemployment of youth and the need for solutions for the current work disengagement of youth and the future prevention of this occupational injustice. Anyone interested in this topic? I would be glad to hear from you leshaw@uwo.ca.

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