

The future of work: an invitation to transform



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Introduction

“Organisations are challenged to safeguard their relevance in a world that is constantly changing,” says Matthijs van der Bijl, trainer and partner at Engagement Builders. Societal trends such as an ageing population, technological advancement and shifting labour markets make it essential for organisations to adapt in order to secure their future.

In practice, this means building an organisation that embraces diversity, applies distributed leadership and cultivates a strong employer brand. It is about creating a working environment where people genuinely want to stay, where collaboration and innovation are central, and where a future-proof workforce forms the foundation. Without a clear focus on the human factor, organisations risk falling behind, while those that successfully navigate this transition do not merely survive, they thrive.

In this whitepaper, we explore these developments, the key themes that will shape organisations in the coming years and, finally, how a strong approach to learning and development can transform these challenges from threats into opportunities. Opportunities to make the organisation more agile, more resilient and better prepared for the future. We look forward to continuing this conversation and sharing how we help organisations grow stronger by facing these challenges head-on.



**Enjoy reading,
Chantal Juijn-Goossens & Matthijs van der Bijl**

Work is Changing

In recent years, the nature of work has been changing at an accelerating pace. As a result, many employers struggle to find the right people and face even greater challenges in keeping them. Climate change, an ageing population and the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic all have lasting effects on the way we organise and experience work.

Climate change forces organisations to take a critical look at their ecological footprint and prepare for stricter regulations and growing societal expectations. At the same time, ageing populations create new challenges: a significant portion of the experienced workforce will retire within the next 5 to 10 years. This puts organisations at risk of losing essential knowledge while facing serious capacity shortages. Who will replace these employees?

The pandemic has also left profound marks. COVID-19 has permanently reshaped employee expectations, making flexibility and hybrid working essential themes.

Many organisations, however, struggle with embedding hybrid work structures, particularly when it comes to balancing efficiency, collaboration and meaningful human connection. This requires a fundamental rethinking of work processes, and of the type of leadership needed to guide these changes.

In addition, a growing group of employees is significantly more aware of, and places more value on, wellbeing and a healthy work-life balance.



All of this forces organisations to rethink how work is structured and adapt to a new reality in which work has become more dynamic and more complex.

Technological progress has a dual effect. On the one hand, automation and artificial intelligence offer new opportunities; on the other hand, work has become more complex. "I recently spoke to a payroll administrator who has been in the profession for 25 years," says Van der Bijl.



“She told me how she used to do everything with a simple calculator. It worked well, and it was clear and manageable. Today, they have to use complex software systems. These tools offer incredible possibilities, but they also take much more time to understand and apply correctly. And now you need close collaboration with IT and other departments to ensure everything runs smoothly. That makes the work more demanding, and sometimes even more exhausting, despite technological progress.”

Meanwhile, the labour market itself is undergoing fundamental change. Generations with very different expectations of work meet each other daily. Younger employees, raised in a digital world, place high value on flexibility, personal development and a meaningful work culture. This contrasts sharply with

more traditional views of work, where stability and loyalty were central.

The consequences of these shifts are clearly visible. The average tenure of an employment relationship has dropped to just 18 months, and vacancies remain open for longer periods. Employers first struggle to attract talent, and then to retain them. The labour market is not only tighter, employees are also more demanding, not only in terms of salary but especially regarding secondary benefits such as flexibility and development opportunities. Organisations that fail to address this reality risk falling behind their competitors and potentially jeopardising their long-term viability.

Change as Opportunity

Yet these challenges also present significant opportunities. By embracing diversity and flexibility, organisations can better anticipate the needs of a rapidly changing labour market. When used thoughtfully, technology can make processes more efficient and improve employee satisfaction. And by intentionally investing in the development of their workforce, organisations build a future-proof organisation and a more resilient, better-equipped employee base.

The central question remains: how can organisations respond to these trends? How do we ensure that work remains not only productive, but also sustainable, and above all meaningful? And how does this help create stronger collaboration and a company culture that makes the organisation a desirable place to work?

“When you look at the future of work, there are a few themes you simply cannot ignore,” says Van der Bijl. “A foundation of inclusion by design, enabling effective collaboration within new structures, distributed leadership, the power of employer branding, and a strong focus on the sustainable development of people. These are the building blocks that help organisations prepare for a future in which work is not only productive, but also meaningful. At Engagement Builders, we advise and support organisations in using learning and development as a strategic tool to anticipate these themes, so that organisations and their people are ready

for what the company will look like in five or ten years. That is the core theme of this whitepaper.”



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Inclusion by Design: Diversity as the Foundation for Better Results

Inclusivity and diversity are not just trends; they form the foundation of a successful and future-proof organization. Research shows that teams with greater diversity not only achieve better outcomes but also make higher-quality decisions.

By bringing together different perspectives, innovation is stimulated and more effective solutions emerge for complex challenges. Inclusive organizations don't just perform better, they also experience lower turnover, attract top talent, and strengthen their reputation. This creates a significant opportunity for companies that do not see inclusivity as a burden, but instead actively work to promote diversity and inclusion and reap the long-term benefits.

Creating Inclusive Work Environments

Building an inclusive work environment requires more than diversity on paper; it calls for a culture in which everyone feels heard and valued. In other words: people are not only invited to the party, they are also invited to dance.

However, for many organizations, inclusivity remains limited to checking boxes, such as the number of women in leadership roles or the equality of pay. And while these

are certainly important elements, they represent only part of the bigger picture. Diversity extends much further and also includes, for example, neurodiversity and other forms of underutilized talent that are often overlooked.

“Many people with neurodiversity, such as individuals on the autism spectrum or those with significant physical disabilities, are often overlooked.”

Inclusivity means actively removing barriers and creating an environment where everyone can use their unique strengths to their fullest.

Van der Bijl illustrates this with the example of neurodiversity: “Many people with neurodiversity, such as individuals on the autism spectrum or those with a more significant physical disability, are often overlooked. Yet they are perfectly

capable of performing certain types of work, and their unique perspective can add tremendous value to teams,” Van der Bijl explains. “Organisations should focus more on removing barriers and adapting work structures so that tasks align better with employees’ strengths, enabling them to perform their work effectively.”

Practical steps toward inclusivity

Van der Bijl outlines several concrete steps organisations can take to build a more inclusive work culture. First, it is essential to incorporate an inclusive perspective already in the design phase of processes and teams. This includes drafting job descriptions that take diverse backgrounds, working conditions and personal circumstances into account, and ensuring that decision-making processes are intentionally inclusive. Additionally, positioning diversity as an opportunity, both for attracting new talent and for supporting existing employees, is crucial. When people can focus on work that aligns with their strengths, teams benefit, and employees gain energy rather than losing it to tasks that do not suit their natural talents.

Challenges and opportunities

While fostering inclusivity can be challenging, it also creates significant opportunities. As mentioned earlier, the benefits experienced by inclusive organisations are substantial. Inclusivity also means shifting from a competency-based approach to one that focuses on tasks and roles, allowing employees to use their innate strengths.

This broader lens enables organisations to look beyond traditional profiles and tap into talent across society, ranging from school leavers to retirees, and across all genders, backgrounds, and neurodiverse characteristics. Research shows that this approach has a demonstrably positive impact on organisational outcomes, making inclusivity not only desirable but highly effective.

The future of organising and collaborating: agility as the core of modern organisations

In the future of work, everything revolves around flexibility. Traditional hierarchical structures are increasingly being replaced by agile, multidisciplinary and iterative teams that can quickly adapt to changing circumstances.

These teams are no longer tied to fixed job roles; instead, they operate as dynamic units in which tasks and responsibilities shift depending on the needs of a project and the roles required to fulfil it. This not only requires a new mindset, but also a fundamental review of how work is organised and coordinated.

Collaboration in a network structure

The classic silo structure, where departments operate largely independently, is steadily giving way to a network structure. In such a structure, flexible teams collaborate toward shared objectives, with a strong emphasis on effective communication and transparency. This applies not only to internal collaboration but also to close cooperation with external partners and clients.



Organisations that embrace this networked way of working see that teams solve problems more quickly and deliver more innovative solutions.

“This highlights the need for organisations to embrace change,” Van der Bijl explains, “with roles being allocated flexibly based on what is needed at any given moment. Multidisciplinary teams can tackle specific challenges faster and more creatively. Success lies in a task-focused approach, where fixed job descriptions no longer define contribution.

A good example is a freelancer who delivers maximum value in just 16 hours, rather than spending 40 hours per week working for a single employer. This illustrates how important it is to compose teams dynamically, focusing on the exact skills and expertise required for a specific task. Rather than relying on fixed teams, it is essential that people step in flexibly depending on the changing needs of the project or projects they contribute to. This ensures that problems are resolved more quickly and results improve.”

The power of clear interactions

A key element in the future of collaboration is the shift from processes to interactions. Minimising bureaucracy and encouraging direct communication are crucial for enabling teams to function effectively. Clear goals and expectations, unambiguous agreements about collaboration and responsibilities, combined with a culture of trust, ensure that employees feel engaged and are able to contribute optimally to the organisation’s success.

Practical benefits of agile organisations

Agile organisations benefit from faster decision-making, increased innovative capacity, and a stronger appeal to talent. They are better equipped to respond to market changes and provide employees with greater autonomy and responsibility. This not only leads to stronger performance and organisational resilience, but also to higher satisfaction and engagement among employees. They are more empowered and able to do the work they are both good at and enjoy.

Organising work around talent, expertise, flexibility and collaboration is therefore not only a necessary step, but a strategic investment in the future.

Distributed leadership: leadership as a collective capacity



The future of leadership no longer lies in the hands of a select few, but is increasingly seen as a collective capacity within organisations. Distributed leadership means that influence and responsibility are shared among team members, enabling faster decision-making and greater innovation.

Instead of a traditional hierarchical structure, where leaders make most of the decisions, distributed leadership is characterised by collaboration, shared goals and mutual interdependence.

“Many traditional organisations view leadership as an individual skill, whereas distributed leadership is about leveraging the strength of the group. It requires leaders to develop the ability to trust and hand over influence to the people with the most expertise and affinity with a given

issue. At the same time, employees must learn to step up and take ownership. If that doesn't happen, teams quickly fall back into hierarchy, which limits innovation and talent development. Breaking down these traditional structures creates a huge opportunity to make decisions faster and achieve better results.”

Collaboration and trust

A crucial part of distributed leadership is a culture of trust, trust in the organisation, in leadership, and in one another. Employees need to know that their contributions are valued and that they have the space to influence outcomes. This requires a culture where open communication and transparency are central. Teams that embrace these principles operate more effectively and are better able to adapt to change.

Flexibility and innovation

Distributed leadership not only strengthens collaboration, it is also a powerful driver of innovation. By sharing influence and actively involving employees and their unique perspectives in decision-making, new ideas and solutions emerge. The flexible nature of this leadership style makes organisations more agile and better prepared for complex challenges.





Practical implementation

“Traditional leadership isn’t disappearing, but it is increasingly being complemented by other styles,” Van der Bijl explains. “It means that leaders don’t have to maintain control over everything; instead, they learn when to take a step back and allow others to lead or to take ownership. That isn’t a loss, it’s an adjustment that leads to better collaboration and more innovation.”

The shift towards distributed leadership requires a deliberate approach. Clear agreements about roles and responsibilities are essential to avoid confusion. In addition, training in personal leadership and strategic leadership skills helps employees understand their new role and fulfil it effectively.

Regular evaluation ensures that distributed leadership continues to align with the organisation’s needs.

Long-term benefits

Distributed leadership enables organisations to operate more quickly and effectively by removing bureaucratic barriers. In traditional hierarchies, innovation and new ideas are often slowed down by lengthy decision-making processes and rigid structures. Sharing influence and responsibility creates a culture in which talents are fully utilised and results improve.

Moreover, this approach contributes to retaining talent within the organisation, as employees feel valued and more involved in the team’s success. It fosters collaboration, innovation and agility, qualities that prepare organisations to face challenges and seize new opportunities.

Employer branding: the importance of a strong employer brand

In an increasingly tight labour market, having a recognisable and compelling employer brand is essential. “What’s the challenge? Everyone is fishing in the same narrowly defined pond and that pond is getting smaller,” Van der Bijl explains.

“Employer branding is about making your company a place people want to work. But it goes beyond marketing; it’s about delivering in practice what you promise on paper. A strong employer brand helps organisations stand out in a competitive market, while also boosting employee engagement and satisfaction.”

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The Employee Value Proposition (EVP) as the foundation

A successful employer branding strategy starts with a clear and attractive Employee Value Proposition (EVP). This defines what makes an organisation unique as an employer. It includes not only salary and secondary benefits, but also development opportunities, culture and purpose. When the EVP aligns with the actual day-to-day experience of employees, the employer brand becomes stronger and more credible. Building an authentic employer brand requires a deep connection between an organisation’s core values and the lived experience of its employees. “Employees are essentially your most important customers,” Van der Bijl emphasises. “The winners of the future are the companies that demonstrate, both in words and in action, that they contribute something meaningful to the world. Culture and purpose make the difference. People want to connect to a mission that truly resonates.”

“You often see young people being drawn into an organisation as if it were some kind of theme park, a place full of energy, fun and endless opportunities. But once inside, the reality turns out to be monotonous and disappointing. They become disillusioned because the experience doesn’t match the promises. The result? They leave after a short time, which has a huge impact on retention and the company’s reputation. That’s exactly why authenticity is so important in employer branding: you have to deliver what you promise.”



The role of HR and marketing

Employer branding requires close collaboration between HR and Marketing. HR understands the needs and experiences of employees, while Marketing has the tools and strategies to communicate these effectively. Together, they can build a brand that not only attracts new talent but also inspires existing employees.

A dynamic strategy

An employer branding strategy needs to be dynamic and adapt to changes within the organisation and the market. Regular evaluation and involving employees in shaping the employer brand are essential to remain relevant and appealing. Organisations that excel at this benefit from a stronger reputation, increased employee engagement and better long-term results.

The future of learning and development

Learning and development form a crucial part of the foundation of a future-proof organisation. In a world that is changing faster than ever, lifelong learning is no longer a luxury, but a necessity.

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Organisations that encourage a learning mindset and create an environment that supports continuous development enable their people not only to keep up with change, but also to actively contribute to innovation and growth.

“Lifelong learning is not a trend; it is the key to adaptability and relevance in a dynamic labour market,” emphasises Van der Bijl. “It’s not just about following courses or training programmes, but about building a culture in which continuous learning is natural. Employees need to feel they can grow without being held back by organisational structures or restrictive procedures. When learning becomes part of everyday work, individual performance improves and the entire organisation gains agility and innovative strength. This leads to tangible benefits such as increased employee engagement, stronger talent

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attraction and a competitive edge because the organisation can respond more quickly to market changes.”

One important development in the future of learning is the rise of micro-learning: small, flexible learning modules that allow employees to quickly develop and apply new skills. This helps organisations respond faster to changing market conditions and technological advancements. Integrating learning into daily work is a crucial step in making this possible.



When learning is no longer a separate activity but a natural part of daily work, it automatically becomes far more effective and valuable.

Leadership also plays a crucial role in cultivating a learning culture. Leaders must not only facilitate the development of their employees, but also lead by example by engaging in continuous learning themselves. Research shows that leadership is essential in a learning organisation, as leaders actively contribute to creating a culture of psychological safety and space for experimentation. This mindset inspires others to adopt a learning attitude in their own work.

Take action

The future of work demands a radical rethinking of how organisations approach learning and development. It is time to invest in systems, processes, and cultures that encourage and integrate learning.

“This is no longer optional; it is a strategic necessity,” says Van der Bijl. “Organisations must stop waiting and start developing a learning strategy that not only meets the current needs of their employees, but is also future-focused. It’s about designing systems and processes that support learning and embed it into the daily flow of work. Only by taking proactive steps can organisations prepare for tomorrow’s challenges. Employees expect their organisation to support their professional and personal growth.”

“An academy, or a house of development, is a crucial instrument for organisations that want to structurally embed learning,” Van der Bijl explains. “It goes beyond standalone training sessions; it is a central platform where continuous learning is organised and stimulated.”

A strong academy creates a shared language within the organisation, builds a culture of collaboration and development, and continues to evolve in order to stay aligned with a changing market and the needs of employees. It not only provides a foundation for innovation and agility, but gives organisations a competitive advantage by enabling them to be better prepared for future challenges.”

“Engagement Builders partners with organisations to build tailored academies that match their unique needs and speak the language of the organisation,” Van der Bijl explains. “It all begins with a fundamental question: which skills are essential for the organisation now and in the future? Answering that question is always our starting point and it ensures that every solution is fully customised, because every answer is different. And that makes sense, because it touches the core of the organisation and its vision for the future.

An in-house academy is therefore more than a training programme; it is a dynamic and strategic system that grows and evolves along with the organisation. By designing it flexibly and aligning it with shifting market conditions, we create an environment that not only supports employees in their current roles, but also prepares them for future challenges. This is not a side initiative, but an integral part of the strategy, enabling organisations not just to survive, but to thrive in a rapidly changing world.”

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What will your organisation look like five years from now?

Engagement Builders invites executives and HR-professionals to take on this challenge together. How can we design and deliver learning and development in a way that helps both the organisation and its people move forward? As we underline throughout this whitepaper, this is an important and urgent conversation. Together, we can build a future where learning and working go hand in hand, and where the organisation becomes stronger than ever.



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