Why We Need a World Work Organisation

Julia Hobsbawm

Work unites us: 3.5 billion people work or are looking for work each day. Other than being born, dying, or searching on Google, more people work than they do anything else.

2025 has echoes of 1945: A time of rebuild and re-imagination.

The paradigm shift in work and working life, which was accelerated by the ravages of Covid-19 and AI's insurgency, presents an essential and overdue opportunity. It is to reframe work into a unified, generic Work.

For this reason, it's time for a new dedicated global body: The World Work Organisation.

The United Crisis of Work

Work is in crisis. There is either insufficient work or work in the wrong places: A significant strain on resources and a geographical nightmare in the human supply chain of talent. The adoption of AI is so rapid that change management and employee engagement jostle on the agenda alongside education and skills. Massive gaps and opportunities co-exist, and managers struggle to keep up.

Workers of all collars - blue and white and the all-collar Flexetariat[1] who increasingly move from full-time work to part-time, freelance, and "insecure work"[2], are restless, anxious, and volatile: There has been a notable rise in both strikes and in open aggression between leaders and their workforces.

Has Live-to-Work Flipped the Switch?

The new united state of work (as I'm calling it) is not to be confused with the United States, which led a live-to-work model for a hundred years, and has become the world's largest economy, through its extraordinary range of products and services.

The 4-day week movement[3] is gaining traction in America in spite of President Trump and Elon Musk's dislike of flexible work on principle, and whilst it is unlikely to become the dominant model of work, may become seen as the symbol of a new American work-to-live mindset.

The timing is significant, because 2026 will be the centenary of Henry Ford's five-day-week. Our own global Workathon research already shows that key issues like talent mobility and flexibility policies are becoming cornerstone policies of nations in the race to succeed – and overtake competitors.

> " *The US may find itself gradually overtaken by stronger forces in Asia, the Middle East, Africa who are not afraid to innovate in much the same way that Henry Ford did when it came to combining not just the economy of work, the technology of work, but the culture too.*

The New World Disorder of Work

There is of course, even more. In a world that is experiencing both fertility drops and an aging population[4], combined with significant hotspots of extreme youth (including large parts of Africa and India)[5], a one-size-fits-all idea of work clearly has to change.

Automation, robotics and AI are, of course, both opportunities and threats, not least because understanding at scale how humans work alongside digital or robotic co-pilots is in its infancy. Plus, the debate rages about whether AI will create net job growth or loss, and whether a Universal Basic Income will become a dominant discussion topic.

> *All of this requires a new framework to think about how we govern, lead, create, and organise work. Hence the call for a new work-focused global body that is human-centric and within which issues from geopolitics to climate to AI, from leadership and management to demographics and generations, are tightly bound.*

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

There is obvious inspiration from the bold vision and spirit that led to the formation of dedicated global institutions for Finance (The IMF and World Bank) and Health (The World Health Organization) immediately after the Second World War – and indeed, the [brilliant International Labour Organisation](), which became the UN's first specialised agency in 1946.[6]

It's important to pay homage to existing international bodies, forums and research organisations which currently address aspects of work, and note that it is perfectly understandable that for eighty years their working models have been regarded as sufficient.

For instance, the ILO has put extraordinary efforts into collating data through its ILOSTAT resource on Labour Statistics. Although it remains a specialised agency looking fundamentally at inequality in work, it is vital. It has almost as many member countries as the UN.

Then there is the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), set up in 1961, although they only have 38 members it is intergovernmental and influential. It created the excellent Better Life Index in 2011, spurred by the groundbreaking Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission which followed the financial crash of 2008[7] and reassessed GDP as insufficient to capture how we live (and work) fully.

The World Economic Forum, established in 1971 (and originally called the European Management Forum), is a forum with 10 distinct centres of collaboration. Whilst none specifically use the term 'work,' jobs and skills are part of its centre for the New Economy and Society, set up in 2023, and has been publishing the excellent Future of Jobs Report since 2016. The influence of the WEF remains substantial.

Some specific datasets from the World Bank, such as Labor Force Participation, are essential. Yet it's as if work is so embedded as to be somewhat taken for granted: "Work" is also not listed as a single topic ("Science and Technology" is). It's only since 2014 that the International Development Association, a division of the World Bank, has included "jobs" to recognise "the role played by labour markets in intermediating between growth and inclusion". [8]

Turning the Wheel of Work Further

Looking ahead to the end of the century, we can see that we are now midway from the point when the last global institutions formed. Something is clearly missing.

The WWO does not need to reinvent the wheel, because duplication is less interesting than innovation. This means not only forming partnerships with the central existing global bodies and forums and bridging gaps but designing a new way to synthesise global data across the economy, technology, and culture of work.

> *Too much of global work data is designed and presented for economists and not people working to lead, manage and design work for the future. Patterns and comparisons should live outside of Excel spreadsheets.*

Ethno-Data

The approach we advocate is one which combes anthropological and ethnographical deep research with scaled data analysis.

> " *We want to reimagine how to interrogate and interpret patterns emerging throughout the increasingly interconnected supply chain of people, systems, services and products which make up work in the world today.*

This picture is changing so constantly that we must fully present what's relevant from the past and the present, in order to plan successfully for the future.

What could be learned about leadership or outcomes, for instance, by comparing aspects of three of the largest employers in the world - the UK's National Health Service (NHS), the world's largest publicly funded health service, employing (headcount 1.5 million people),[9] India's Ministry of Defence, the world's largest single employer (nearly 3 million employees), and Walmart (the largest private employer in the world has over 2 million employees)?

Or take countries with an aging population like Japan, which is just introducing a 4-Day-Week in Tokyo as (radically) a way to encourage population growth. Imagine what can be learned by following a 'dashboard' of progress in this city. Can a workforce policy not only enliven work but give birth to a new generation as a result?

Then there's the astonishing increase in female participation in the workforce in Saudia Arabia by over 10% since 2018. What will the longitudinal effects be of these policy changes? Every country is full of "firsts".

Now, let's put culture into the mix. I'm a big fan of the Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede, whose six Cultural Dimensions framework arose from years of research at IBM to look at how different workers worldwide behave according to culture and custom.

Walmart has been the largest company in the world for most of this century. As 25%[10] of Walmart's 2 million employees work outside of its American borders, including 28,000 at Massmart in Africa and 38,000 in Japan,[11] how could they apply the Geert Hofstede lens (or the Workathon Frame) to their workforce and participate in longitudinal and attitudinal data studies and share the results? The WWO could be the resource for such enquiry. Certainly the catalyst.

What about China's values of *Guanxi*, in which networks play a hugely beneficial role in business growth? China is Sweden's largest trading partner in Asia. How does Sweden's *Fika* tradition of deliberate, community work breaks affect the mindset, productivity, worker interaction, or supply chain process between these countries? Do they discuss *Guanxi* or test it out – and vice versa?

The Culture of Work Around the World in Words

Kurzarbeit   Fika   Kaisu   Ubuntu   Wai

Dharbat mi'allim   Wa   Kaixen   Hygge   Chin-wag

Smoko   Ikagi   Comida   Lobola   Guanxi

Harambee   Arbejdsglaede   Water Cooler

WORKATHON WORK CLOUD

The United State of Work Report © Workathon 2025

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For Workathon's pilot 12-country study applying three different criteria, we did indeed find a "united state" of work applied: From Brazil to Estonia, from India to Italy, government-level levers are being pulled in similar ways – policies to attract or accelerate what the economy needs, and cultural influences which have a bearing on it. We traced patterns amongst emerging digital nomad nations; saw the surprising but evident rise of Saudi Arabia and Jordan into offering the kind of progressive, flexible work policies[12] we associate with Nordic nations which led the world before Covid-19.[13]

However, it's insufficient to rely on a data benchmark model of 6% of the world's countries, created by a small start-up when the world needs a global data dashboard powered by a public-private engine of governments, corporations, and NGOs. There's a clear knowledge gap here – and a clear resource gap.

Above all, the data needs to be synthesised and scalable. Existing technology solutions and data troves can feed into the overall picture, but these need to be re-organised and recreated to suit the brief.

Clearly, some of the gaps identified in the way work trends are compiled and interpreted at a global level require an entirely new data model to be designed and built.

> " *The ethno-data approach must combine the best of the human and the best of the machine.*

Think how powerful it could be if the WWO partnered with some innovative technology players to organise and scale our approach to work trends and data from the last hundred years? This is where a dedicated Large Language Model (LLM) created alongside one or more technology partners is vital.

Catch the Wave of Thought Leadership

Here's another gap. Ideas. During the first wave of Covid-19 in 2020, as I researched my book *The Nowhere Office*,[14] it was Nick Bloom's work with his colleagues on work from home experiments in China from 2013 which first caught my attention.[15]

> " *Another component of the WWO would be to synthesise the literature of work, specifically the management, leadership, and academic research and published non-fiction, which is a growing field, not only in a searchable archive but one which applies lessons from yesterday to today – and models them for tomorrow.*

The volume and depth of literature and analysis of work about work began to climb steeply from 2020 onwards. In addition to distinguished academics whose papers began to be closely followed, including Prithwiraj Choudhury of Harvard, Juliet Schor of Boston College and Lynda Gratton of London Business School, a plethora of corporate research also began to build into the tsunami it is today: it's completely overwhelming without adequate curation.

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The Microsoft Trends Index has become key, as has monthly economic data from **Linked In**; A new work ideas canon is emerging which includes **Gallup's** *State of Global Workplace Report;*[16] **PWC's** *Global Workforce Hopes & Fears Index;*[17] employee engagement firm ***Integral's annual index***; law firm **Lewis Silkin's** latest Strategic Workforce Priorities Report: What Matters Most?[18] and **JLL's** 2025 trends report on the rise of data centres (part of their existing libraries of global work research relating to trends including corporate real estate and workplace).

On technology company **Asana** publishes data on innovation across six countries to identify 'hidden taxes'. A report on AI and business in 2024 from global IT firm **Tata Consultancy Services** found that 87% of senior business executives from across 24 countries and 12 industries[19] have already deployed AI to enhance or improve existing revenue streams, and 72% are "reworking or planning on reworking their business strategy or operations" around AI.

Think too how extraordinary it would be to combine a superfast AI-enabled but human-led ethno-data project and partner that with some of the best business schools, companies, libraries, publishing houses and media organisations to do so! A global resource of actionable business education, combined with data analysis applied to your own individual country or organisation's needs.

Take the history of management writing and experiments buried deep in the reading lists of MBA courses, which rarely surface beyond them. Have you heard of Elton Mayo's Hawthorne Studies? They are incredibly significant to the history of workforce teams and the development of 'people' management. They should be revisited today - and possibly recreated.

Such a system could enable live simulations all over the world – simultaneously translated of course. An estimated five million academic papers are published yearly, and most never see the light of day. What about those Tik-Toks of work? The podcasts and YouTube broadcasts? Tweets and LinkedIn are a library of their own with vast treasures of repeatable and usable insight about work. But blink and you miss them.

At the moment, all of this ultra-relevant work is staying in cyberspace in a static and siloed way. I find it shocking, especially as policymakers and executives badly need new ideas, and especially when so much of what was published can be experimented with, or repurposed.

The World Work Organisation can and should be the world's biggest resource of all content on work.

Key Work Concepts to Keep in Mind

Amy Edmondson's
Psychological Safety

Charles Handy's
Portfolio Career

Lynda Gratton and Andrew Scott's
100-Year Life

Claudia Goldin's
Motherhood Penalty

Nassim Nicholas Taleb's
Antifragile

Arpit Gupta's
Doom Loop

Cal Newport's
Deep Work

Martin Seligman's
Learned Optimism

Juliet Schor's
Overworked American

Daron Acemoğlu's
Machine Usefulness

Klaus Schwab's
4th Industrial Revolution

Ethan Mollick's
Jagged Frontier

Barbara Kellerman's
Leaders and Followers

Nick Bloom's
Nike Swoosh

Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's
Capabilities Approach

> *It's time for new models to understand the connections between people, places, and technologies at the centre of society. But it's also time for a new global institution which frames this new world of work.*
>
> Melissa Fisher, Chief Cultural Anthropologist, Workathon

The case has, I hope, been made for why we need a World Work Organisation and why one feels inevitable in these times.

The case has also been made for uniting what currently exists with a new model which combines ethnography and data, in the rich case study tradition of academia, utilising the best of the most powerful capabilities of AI with the best people in the world creating the framework.

Framing is vital, even if working groups morph and change, as they inevitably will - and should. At Workathon, we created the 'Super Six' framework of interlinked challenges that we believe apply universally and belong grouped together: *Workplace & Work's Evolution; Rights, Equality & Health; AI Adoption & Tech Infrastructure; Talent, Skills & Learning; People, Culture & Leadership;* and *Demography, Geography & Generations.*

Part of first steps might be to convene a global debate on this, a forum to examine and look at what different countries and industries feel about this organisational opening gambit. Watch this space!

Operating System

Currently, the organisational structure of WWO hovers on paper between being a global forum and being established formally. Ultimately, I prefer (and am planning for) the latter. Workathon intends to undertake the key development phase before a formal governance structure is decided upon.

As befits the times, there will be no single HQ but a series of offices in different cities worldwide and a distributed workforce. There can be different host nations for various aspects of work, but arguably, both America and Europe have had their fair share of headquartered global bodies. Not Washington, Geneva, or Paris as the first opening satellite offices!

Tributes and Tributaries

As of March 2025, the fifth anniversary of Covid-19, the most widespread transformation of work ever is underway. The systems thinking around work and the institutions that look at work should adapt accordingly.

> " *I'm mindful of the African proverb 'only a fool tests the river with two feet,' but think of the embryonic WWO as a new river. One which has expertise flowing into it from tributaries, which finally gather in an enormous ocean of pooled knowledge.*

This, in turn, makes a united state of work recognised, brings more voices, countries, experiences, and ideas, and puts them to work for all. Join the conversation about the World Work Organisation: wwo-org.org

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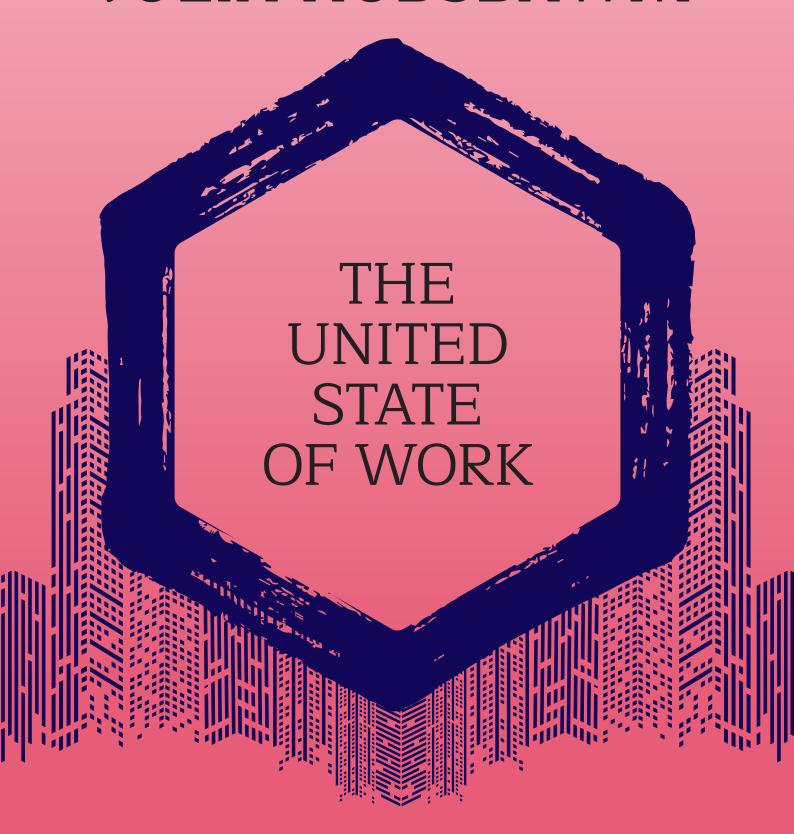
Extract from

THE UNITED STATE OF WORK

How Working Life's Changed –
and What's Coming Next

A Workathon report 5 years after Covid-19 edited by

JULIA HOBSBAWM

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THE UNITED STATE OF WORK

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