



**WOMEN  
AND THE  
FUTURE  
OF WORK**

LAUREN PASQUARELLA DALEY, PHD



# Women and the Future of Work

The workplace is changing fast. In just a few years, we've seen technological advances, social movements, demographic shifts, and geopolitical disruptions cause dizzying changes to how organizations do business. And the forces revolutionizing work are getting stronger as artificial intelligence and other innovations are integrated into almost every aspect of society. At the same time, the way that workers experience the world of work—and what they want from it—is increasingly affected by their dynamic, intersectional identities. How companies confront these opportunities and challenges will determine their success as we stride further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Success is possible when women are full partners in the workplace of the future. Indeed, Catalyst research finds that leaders who embrace a more holistic view of diversity, equity, and inclusion can build a more innovative and collaborative workforce, which is associated with increased productivity and better business results.<sup>1</sup> Women, companies, and society will benefit.<sup>2</sup>

With this perspective, companies construct a workplace where people work together as unique, complex human beings. Team members collaborate with one another and new technology in a flexible, virtual culture where everyone can belong, contribute, and thrive. Organizations stand out for both their innovation and their positions on social issues.

This approach adds depth to traditional D&I initiatives, which first focused on women and people of color and then enlarged in scope to include LGBTQ+ employees, parents, veterans, and other groups of employees.

To get there, forward-thinking organizations must reimagine their current diversity and inclusion efforts into a system that keeps the humanity of the workforce at its core, but also broadens the perspective to include all aspects of work. It's time to look through the lens of gender diversity, equity, and inclusion to evaluate how together we can achieve a future of work that maximizes opportunities for all genders. We must take a fresh look at *who* is doing the work; *what* our work has become; *when* and *where* it happens, *why* we are doing it, and *how* to make it most successful.

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## Who Is Doing the Work?

### INTERSECTING IDENTITIES AND EXPERIENCES THAT SHAPE US

**Work is accomplished by human beings—each of us uniquely complex and skilled.** A biracial woman born in 1967 who immigrates to another country will, by definition, have a very different life from a Millennial white man who has not left his home country. Social movements, cultural expectations, and other factors influence how each of us experiences the world.<sup>3</sup> Talking about our differences and similarities—and acknowledging the privileges and barriers that come with them—can be difficult and, in some situations, uncomfortable and potentially threatening.<sup>4</sup> As the workforce diversifies and widens across the globe, these kinds of conversations are essential to group collaboration and your organization's success. To broaden your understanding of your colleagues, challenge yourself to:

- Recognize the complexity of overlapping identities, including your own.
- Ask questions and share stories to understand how your colleagues experience the world and workplace.
- Debunk myths and stereotypes about generations, races, ethnicities, nationalities, and genders to combat bias in workplace interactions, hiring algorithms, and performance reviews.<sup>5</sup>

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# What Is the Work?

## AI AND HUMAN-MACHINE COLLABORATION

### **Our work is optimizing teams made up of both humans and machines.**

Robots will be your colleagues. And while machines are getting smarter, they don't possess the same abilities as humans to listen, empathize, and relate to other people. As more routine tasks are automated, inclusive interpersonal skills will become even more essential—companies will need leaders who can build diverse and collaborative teams that integrate and optimize both tech and human resources. Inclusive collaboration can be facilitated by artificial intelligence, which can serve as an equalizer, or it can be hindered if AI is biased in its design or its data sets.<sup>6</sup> To develop the leaders of tomorrow, organizations should:

- Reskill and upskill workers of the future to create, manage, and interact with artificial intelligence.<sup>7</sup>
- Use technology to assist with collaboration and automation so that humans can focus on innovation, productivity, and relationships.<sup>8</sup>
- Understand that interpersonal skills will be just as important—or more—than technical skills in the workplaces of the future.<sup>9</sup>

### **SPOTLIGHT: AI AND GENDER BIAS<sup>10</sup>**

Artificial intelligence can powerfully address *and* reinforce gender bias, depending on how well it is created, trained, regulated, monitored, and adjusted. Adding more women with technical skills in the AI field is one way to reduce bias by providing additional perspectives and more fail safes, thus creating and training AI to more accurately reflect a diverse and inclusive society. Greater diversity can also reduce groupthink and enhance team decision-making, leveraging a greater variety of perspectives for faster and more thorough decisions.<sup>11</sup> Homogenous AI teams and researchers may not be paying close enough attention to notice when bias has crept in and impacted the AI they've created or trained.

# Where and When Does Work Happen?

## A FLEXIBLE AND GEOGRAPHICALLY DISPERSED WORKFORCE

**Work is freed from specific times and places.** As more and more employees expect flexibility,<sup>12</sup> organizations are solving hiring shortages<sup>13</sup> by sourcing talent in new locations. These trends converge to liberate organizations from traditional work structures, location-specific talent pools, schedules, and brick-and-mortar locations and free employees to work across distance, location, and time.<sup>14</sup> One major benefit is the ability to respond easily to the increasingly frequent disruptions related to advancing technology, climate change, and geopolitics that force people and companies to pick up and move.<sup>15</sup> Breaking down the old culture and building up a new one requires you to:

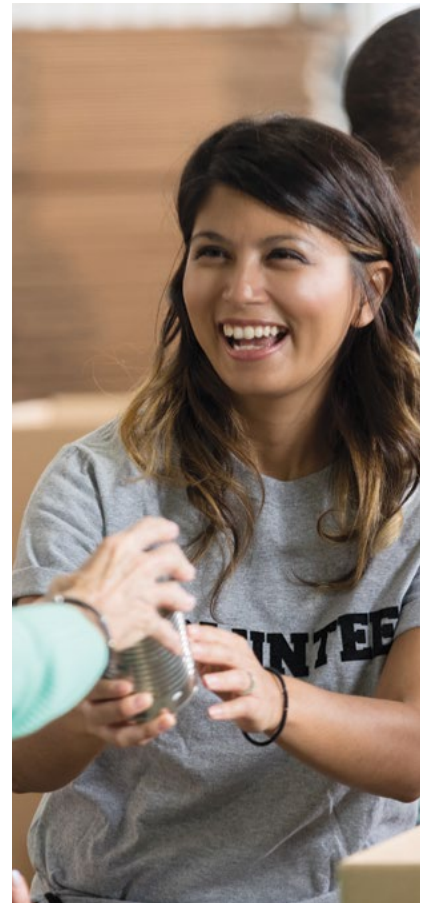
- Invest in technologies to work across time zones and cultures.
- Reimagine the work day, face time, and how you assess and develop virtual employees.<sup>16</sup>
- Role model the agility that comes from discarding the old constraints of where and when we work.
- Focus on women, whose careers and lives are deeply affected by rigid expectations and environmental disruption.<sup>17</sup>

# Why Are We Working?

## ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AND SHIFTING EXPECTATIONS ABOUT WORK

**Work is not just about profits any more.**<sup>18</sup> Increasingly employees, customers, and shareholders expect corporate leaders to take a stand on social issues, promote diversity and inclusion, and institute flexible leave policies, both inside and outside the workplace.<sup>19</sup> Having tough conversations about these issues acknowledges the real-life experiences employees face and can contribute to a more inclusive culture.<sup>20</sup> Leaders should:

- Listen to and address employee concerns, understanding that they may have the same concerns as your customer or client base.
- Recognize that social issues infiltrate the workplace, so you can create a culture of respect and accountability that honors employee experiences.<sup>21</sup>
- Find a competitive advantage by becoming a B Corporation, enacting fair trade policies, or aligning your organization's and CEO's values with a bold vision for change.<sup>22</sup>



# How Do We Work Successfully?

## RESKILL AND UPSKILL TO DEVELOP INCLUSIVE LEADERS AND SOLVE TALENT SHORTAGES

### **Reskilling and upskilling is about more than just learning new tech.**

Train your leaders to be more inclusive, and you'll be more likely to recruit and retain under-tapped candidates such as women and virtual workers who can fill your talent demands for the future.<sup>23</sup> All team members should learn how to demonstrate empathy—showing that they understand the experiences, feelings, and thoughts of someone else.<sup>24</sup> This often-overlooked, but critical, leadership skill humanizes workplaces.<sup>25</sup> It also encourages robust collaboration and problem-solving, which can't happen without listening to dissenting ideas with humility and curiosity.<sup>26</sup> To create a more human workplace, leaders can:

- Develop, recognize, track, and reward inclusive teamwork skills such as listening, curiosity, humility, creativity, and courage.<sup>27</sup>
- Update leadership expectations and training so leaders from the top down are modeling these behaviors.
- Hold teams accountable for collaborating<sup>28</sup> and innovating across departments, cultures, technologies, and regions.<sup>29</sup>
- Build an empathic workplace where employees can speak their truth—which may result in a culture that is less likely to tolerate gender inequality and sexual harassment.<sup>30</sup>

## **SPOTLIGHT: HR AND TALENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS IN THE FUTURE OF WORK**

Finding and developing a balanced, skilled workforce will be crucial for women and the future of work. Reskilling and upskilling workers—both for technical and interpersonal skills—can help meet the demands for attracting, retaining, and promoting talent in the future workplace.<sup>31</sup>

To hire and keep a diverse workforce, you'll have to ensure that all types of bias are eradicated from your recruiting, development, and promotion processes and materials. Make your HR processes reflect the future you aspire to by:

- Rethinking your job descriptions to identify potential and go beyond formal education.
- Refreshing your hiring approach and performance management systems to assess and reward interpersonal skills.
- Investing in training programs for both improving technical skills and becoming a collaborative, inclusive leader.

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Catalyst is a global nonprofit working with some of the world's most powerful CEOs and leading companies to help build workplaces that work for women. Founded in 1962, Catalyst drives change with pioneering research, practical tools, and proven solutions to accelerate and advance women into leadership—because progress for women is progress for everyone.

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