



Curtin University

# A PURPOSE-FOCUSED APPROACH TO DECISIONS ABOUT RETURNING TO IN-PERSON OFFICE WORK

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## **REMOTE OFFICE WORK AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

The global Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the way we live our lives. In addition to health and economic effects, consequences for the ways that we work have been dramatic and persistent. Office cubicles and boardroom tables made way for Zoom meetings and email exchanges, with further and ongoing changes to be navigated for some time yet. Now that many countries have achieved significant vaccination rates, a return to ‘business as usual’ is considered by some to be necessary and perhaps long overdue, prompting discussion about a return to in-person office work after the rapid and ad hoc shift to remote working arrangements. However, many employees who experienced benefits from working remotely have expressed reluctance about returning to the office, and responses amongst employers have been mixed. Some of the disagreements between employees and employers about whether and how to return to the office reflect a new urgency and salience to previously underlying trends, while others seem genuinely novel or even ‘unprecedented’ (to use a term that has become commonplace during the pandemic). In any case, the issue of whether, and how, to return to in-person office-based work seems ripe for an investigation that is informed by a thematic understanding of the possible ways forward and intended to provide a workable and justifiable approach.

Some of the largest and most influential global companies are navigating the issue in real time and in the public eye, and they are coming to strikingly disparate positions. Divergent approaches are evident even amongst dominant firms in just the technology sector. Apple employees, for example, disapproved of a policy that would require them to return to the office for three days a week (Schiffer, 2021), expressing a desire to instead maintain a more flexible approach that allows more home-based work. Google employees were initially threatened with pay cuts if they opted to continue working from home (BBC News, 2021), although that position has been revised since (Kelly, 2021). In contrast, Facebook and Twitter have been supportive of maintaining remote work, perhaps indicating that for some companies at least, there are competitive and cost advantages to a reduction in office work (Poleg, 2021).

Nor is there a uniform position amongst employees regarding whether to return to in-person office work and under what conditions. A 2020 online study (Weststar, et al., 2020) involving 11,000 university staff in Canada and Australia recorded a variety of opinions. While some staff reported positive experiences with working from home (especially in terms of having fewer interruptions and saving on commute time), others expressed a desire to return to campus, citing various difficulties with working from home (e.g., teachers cited challenges in providing effective on-line lessons). Some surveys of employers, too, have reported improvements in staff well-being and productivity arising from home-based work relative to previous office-based arrangements (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2021; Neilson, 2021).

An article in the Sydney Morning Herald (Wade & Patty, 2020) illustrates starkly the two sides of the debate. It features a Sydney resident who previously commuted for five hours a day (from the Blue Mountains to Parramatta) who says that, for that reason alone, she will find it hard to return to the office after months of working from home. But the article also presents the perspective of Ken Morrison, Chief Executive of the Property Council of Australia, who claims that "if we're to get the economy going again, we're going to need thriving CBDs" (Wade & Patty, 2020).

Remote office work has also raised issues arising from the breakdown between 'personal' space and 'work' space, including issues of privacy and consent arising from the intrusion of work technology into the home. For example, one call centre in Colombia required its employees to allow the company to install cameras in the home to enable centralised monitoring of work performance (Solon, 2021).

It is not obvious that any of these perspectives or issues is decisive for determining a single, best approach for navigating the matter of a return to office work. It is a mistake to begin with mere opinions or observable dissimilarities between performing work at home and in an office. Reliance on mere opinions encourages a focus amongst disputants on "whatever matters most to me right now" (what we will refer to as "the argument from self-interest") and a focus on dissimilarities promotes discussions about particular issues and personal interests rather than a generalisable approach and shared opportunities. Neither is suited to achieving a position that is agreeable to all the parties while preserving the inherent purposes of productive work.

This paper proposes a different approach: a philosophically informed decision-making methodology that encourages constructive discussions amongst employers and employees; is directed towards shared higher-level goals; is consistent with planning frameworks already in place in many businesses; can be amended over time without disruptive disputes; and accounts for the particularities of each industry, enterprise, workplace, and job. It seeks to establish a more fundamental basis for discussions about the issue: specifically, the purpose and nature of the work of those affected. If these matters can be decided, then subsequent discussions might be focused more upon the shared outcomes to which stakeholders are committed and less upon individual preferences and 'hunches.'

## **THE FUTURE OF REMOTE OFFICE WORK**

To motivate the need for a new approach, let us first survey the approaches open to employers for deciding whether, and how, employees ought to return to the office. In his recent book *The Future of the Office*, Peter Cappelli identifies four basic possibilities. First, employees could be instructed to return to the office (when it is safe to do so). In other words, we could simply "pick up where we left off" (Cappelli, 2021, p. viii). Since office work is a tried-and-tested mode of working, and requisite office space, equipment, and procedures are in place already, perhaps it is reasonable to

return to previous arrangements as soon as possible. However, this approach would ignore the preferences of employees who favour remote work (leading inevitably to decreased employee satisfaction), productivity benefits achieved by remote staff in some industry sectors and roles, and the realisation of opportunities consequent to allowing or enabling remote work (e.g., decreased office space requirements, changed wage and allowance structures, productivity benefits from technologies whose threshold business case depends on remote work).

A second option is that staff be allowed to continue working away from the office; in other words, that arrangements initially considered temporary become permanent. Not only have the advantages of remote work become evident (or been substantiated) by experiences during the pandemic, but it is possible that the transition to remote work has provided a glimpse of a new paradigm where office work relies more heavily on electronic information exchange. However, this option suggests that the case in favour of remote work is both compelling and already decided, even though there are in fact a range of well-reasoned positions and there has been little research conducted into the appropriateness of home-based work for particular industries, companies, geographies, and jobs. Like the first alternative, it instead promotes a simplistic ‘either/or’ debate; unlike the first option, it exaggerates the benefits of the newer alternative.

The third option identified by Cappelli is a hybrid approach, where some staff would return to the office (for at least some portion of their work time) while others continue working remotely. One advantage of this approach is that it appears to enable all parties to achieve their preference, notwithstanding the fact that specific arrangements would vary between industries, companies, and workplaces, as Cappelli (2021, pp. viii-ix) acknowledges. In particular, it seems to enable mediation between the competing interests of employees and employers, and for this reason, it has been adopted already by several large companies. Google CEO Sundar Pichai said in a recent tweet that the future of work at Google will be characterised by ‘flexibility’ (Pichai, 2021), noting that while many Google employees want to be at the office, others desire the flexibility offered by working from home for a couple of days per week (Pichai, 2021). Consistent with this observation, Google announced plans to have around 60% of its employees located in the office for a ‘few days a week,’ while 20% would be at ‘new office locations’ and 20% would work remotely (Kelly, 2021). Similarly, Apple CEO Tim Cook has expressed a desire for staff to return to the office three days a week from early-2022, and Microsoft, too, has expressed interest in the hybrid model, going so far as to grant some employees the opportunity to work remotely all the time subject to managerial approval (Laboratoria, 2021). Such other large companies as Twitter, Spotify, and LinkedIn have announced that they will adopt disparate versions of the hybrid approach (Laboratoria, 2021).

Although the general characteristics of these first three options appear clear-cut, Cappelli notes it is “not at all clear what we should do” (2021, p. ix) to select the

optimal approach. Neither of the first two options is properly justified, the first being a reversion to a previous situation simply because it was the previous situation, and the second exaggerating the relative benefits of one option (remote work) and suggesting that the case is clear cut despite a paucity of evidence. Regarding the third option, the fact that several high-profile companies have chosen to adopt the hybrid approach is not itself reason for other firms to follow: that would require sound reasoning, proper evaluation of factors relevant to the decision, and a clear account of the decision-making process, carefully modified for another company's circumstances. Instead, justifications of the hybrid approach offered by the companies cited above focus on an acknowledgement that some stakeholders will benefit from (and appreciate) continuation of the new arrangements, asserting that it is therefore a *reasonable* thing to do, and suggesting (often obliquely) that remote work might bring benefits for the company's performance. In other words, these explanations take the form of a managerial version of "the argument from self-interest," perhaps tempered by concern for aggregate employee welfare or even the wellbeing of an employee or group of employees who would benefit very greatly from remote work. Regardless, such simplistic thinking sets aside such complicated questions as which (and whose) benefits matter, how much they matter and why, how they relate to other organisational or operational imperatives, and how these issues have been decided. Even in cases where a manager's motivation for pursuing the third option is morally sound, the decision might be compromised by being focused too much on the short term without careful consideration of the organisation's fundamental intent.

The extent to which each response invokes and relies upon "the argument from self-interest" is telling, since it entails two significant problems. First, the fact that opinions are mixed means that self-interest will only get the decision-maker so far: the self-interest of employees and employers will inevitably clash in certain scenarios, as will the interests of some employees relative to other employees. It is simply not possible to satisfy everyone's interests in their entirety, so that trade-offs (and a sub-optimal outcome) are unavoidable. Second, making decisions based solely on satisfying individual interests may not always best serve the company, community, and corporate social responsibility more broadly. It might be that by continuing remote work arrangements, the interests of certain employees are maximised (e.g., by not requiring those staff who live very far from the office to commute) but their absence does such harm to cohesive office operations that the company's financial performance is impacted, leading to cost-cutting lay-offs in the longer-term. Or again, it might be that a company whose presence is crucial to a local economy is able to maximise employee wellbeing by continuing a work-from-home policy but damages the profitability of local businesses in the process.

Given these issues with the first three alternatives, Cappelli proposes a fourth, the so-called "waiting to see" approach (Cappelli, 2021, p. xv). On this option, the best thing to do, from the managerial perspective, is to wait and see what other management

teams do before making major decisions about remote work. Since the issues involved are relatively new, it might be best to learn from the actions of industry leaders such as Apple and Microsoft who establish standards that other companies (or at least, other companies within the technology sector) can follow and that employees come to expect. If nothing else, it seems reasonable for less influential firms in the market to adopt employment conditions decided by market leaders.

But there are numerous problems with this approach, too. First, the urgency of the challenge might preclude waiting and seeing, especially if a firm is ill-equipped to facilitate work outside the office and needs to make investment decisions to regain operational effectiveness, or if employees are upset with waiting for a decision. As Cappelli points out, the waiting period might be significant (Cappelli, 2021, p. 52). Second, industry leaders are not making decisions that are consistent with each other, at least for the moment, making their example difficult to decipher and follow (Cappelli, 2021, p. 52). Indeed, some companies such as Google have already changed their position, initially promoting a return to the office and subsequently adopting a hybrid approach. In any case, whenever clear patterns do emerge amongst industry leaders, it is not certain that their decisions will be relevant to businesses and industries whose operations are of a different kind, scale, or market position. Finally, there are issues with deciding which ‘leading’ companies to learn from. The term ‘industry leader’ might pertain to sales, profitability, product range or technical expertise, for example, factors that do not signify superior decision-making when it comes to working conditions.

Since the generic kinds of approach to decisions about a return to in-person office work are flawed, and examples from high-profile companies are not yet well justified, there is good reason for companies to pursue an alternative approach. We believe that a purpose-focused approach will be beneficial, allowing businesses to move beyond ‘wait and see’ and ‘self-interest’ approaches towards a universalizable methodology that entails less delay and fewer risks associated with making a wrong decision. To decide which approach to adopt, and how to customise it to the circumstances of a particular business and particular jobs, employers and employees ought to orient their assessment around the fundamental purpose of the business. That purpose will differ between companies, of course, and so there ought to be no expectation of a ‘one size fits all’ decision. Neither will it ignore self-interest or the lessons to be learned from other businesses; on the contrary, these aspects are crucial to the approach that we propose. However, although application of the methodology is context-sensitive, we contend that the methodology itself can be used in any enterprise and at any time to produce a decision that is both better justified and more likely to lead to a harmonious outcome than the alternatives.

## THE PURPOSE-FOCUSED APPROACH

The mixed and conflicting opinions about the future of remote office work entail questions about both how decisions ought to be made and what factors are relevant to making them. What considerations should inform the discussion? Whose interests should carry the day? Which authorities ought to ground policies? How ought disparate interests to be weighed against one another? Rather than deciding such matters in advance—which would encourage further disputes—our proposal is to focus first on understanding the purpose of an organisation broadly and second on the purpose of the jobs within that organisation that incorporate office work. While the purposes of factory work, agricultural work, manual work, and so on will certainly raise interesting and important issues regarding the nature of ‘work’ understood conceptually, office work is the focus of the current debate about whether and how to return to the workplace, and so is the focus of this report. Office workers were the first to switch to remote work at the start of the pandemic because of the risks of a shared, enclosed workplace and the prospects for communicating via electronic means.

The purpose-focused approach draws upon the timeless work of Aristotle. According to him, everything (people, flowers, manufactured machinery, institutions, ...), whether manufactured or naturally occurring, finished or changing, has a ‘*telos*’, which is its ultimate purpose, end, or goal. Human actions and thoughts, too, have a *telos* (hereafter, simply, ‘purpose’). Aristotle writes that “every skill and every inquiry, and similarly every action and rational choice, is thought to aim at some good; and so the good has been aptly described as that at which everything aims” (*Nicomachean ethics*, 1999, Book 1, Chapter 1). The purpose of catching a bus, for example, may be to travel quickly to university; the purpose of getting to university may be to get an economics degree; the purpose of pursuing an economics degree might be to become an economist. Furthermore, according to Aristotle, all human actions are meant to contribute to the ultimate purpose of human lives generally: to achieve an existence marked by flourishing and fulfillment.

Aristotle believed that if we can define an activity’s purpose, we will be better equipped to understand its proper exercise and deployment, since the purpose will define the relevance and appropriate application of its attributes. For example, if the purpose of a knife is to cut things, then a knife made from jelly would not fulfil its purpose. Understanding this, we realise that an attempt to utilise a knife made of jelly to cut some bread will inevitably end in failure. But the obverse is also true and equally as informative: just as the purpose of a sporting team is to win matches, leading inevitably to an internally derived need to recruit talented players, train hard, and employ coaches who understand the game, so the purpose of work will inform the characteristics of successful achievement in that field of endeavour. (Note that for our purposes here it is also important to note that the context matters—a stainless-steel knife is designed to perform well in the average kitchen conditions but even the

best quality stainless steel knife will not do well if it is kept in corrosive conditions. Context matters for performance.)

If we determine that the fundamental purpose of office work is dignity and economic self-sufficiency for employees, for example, then the lived experience of those employees and their preferences regarding work location should count for a lot. If, on the other hand, the purpose of work is principally economic productivity that produces profits for employers and an income tax base for nations and governments (or perhaps even ‘thriving CBDs,’ with all of the associated public policy implications), then profitability considerations will be foremost. The true picture will probably be some amalgam of these, as suggested by discussions about which jobs are valuable, worthwhile, and desirable, and why, and which employers are amongst the ‘best.’ Debates about the merits or otherwise of the casualization of the academic workforce or the rise of insecure ‘gig economy’ jobs reflect such purpose-oriented conceptions of work: if casual work arrangements diminish rewards for the research that informs superior teaching, and if gig workers are not accorded the status of ‘employee’ that ensures reasonable rewards and the protection of employment rights, then there is a conflict between the characteristics of those jobs and their purposes.

Significantly for our analysis, Aristotle’s theory incorporates a multi-tiered, hierarchical arrangement of purposes and attributes, the ultimate purpose and attributes of a thing or activity realised more or less well by subordinate ones. In the case of people, understanding the ultimate purpose of human life allows us to understand the best general kind of life to lead, the best patterns of action to pursue, and the best choice of several options at any moment. Aristotle argues that the purpose of human life is to pursue ‘eudaimonia’, by which he meant human flourishing or happiness (*Nicomachean ethics*, 1999, Book 1). By living a virtuous life—being wise, compassionate, courageous, generous, and so on—we achieve flourishing and thus fulfil our purpose. But realisation of these attributes over the course of a lifetime entails a range of actions, judgements, and commitments. Consider what Aristotle says in the following:

Since there are many actions, skills, and sciences, it happens that there are many ends as well: the end of medicine is health, that of shipbuilding, a ship, that of military science, victory, and that of domestic economy, wealth. But when any of these actions, skills, or sciences comes under some single faculty—as bridlemaking and other sciences concerned with equine equipment come under the science of horsemanship, and horsemanship itself and every action in warfare come under military science, and others similarly come under others—then in all these cases the end of the master science is more worthy of choice than the ends of the subordinate sciences, since these latter ends are pursued also for the sake of the former. And it makes no difference whether the ends of the actions are the activities themselves, or something else

additional to them, as in the sciences just mentioned (*Nicomachean ethics*, 1999, Book 1, Chapter 1)

Human existence entails a hierarchy of ends (or purposes) under the ultimate end of eudaimonia, each of which in turn requires certain actions and judgements. If those subordinate components are not realised, then the flourishing life will become less and less viable or complete. Just as Aristotle says that there are many ends subordinate to a 'master science,' so we will suggest that there are many 'work types' (and associated jobs and activities) within each organisation, each with its own purpose, but directed nonetheless towards achieving the organisation's ultimate purpose.

To apply the purpose-focused approach to the matter of returning to the office, we need first to determine the purpose of office work. After all, office work is not conducted for its own sake, but to contribute to some higher purpose. That higher purpose is not an abstract universal one, but rather the ultimate purpose of the organisation within which the work is conducted. As such, to understand the proper attributes of office work, it is necessary to identify the organisation's ultimate purpose. Again, this ought not to be a conceptual, notional, or generalised statement: operating at such an abstract level as Aristotle in his discussion of eudaimonia would not be helpful for deciding which staff should return to the office and under what conditions. Furthermore, there is no one, objectively correct expression of an organisation's purpose; indeed, this is a matter that will probably be debateable even amongst the people within it. What is the ultimate purpose of a manufacturing company and a particular manufacturing plant within that company? From one perspective, the purpose of both is to make a profit or produce quality materials for consumption or investment, although it might be equally right to say that the former is meant to sell products in a final goods market and the latter to manufacture those products. Even in very simple cases—a single company producing one product line, for example—the statement of purpose will not be self-evident: is the purpose of a salmon farming company like Tassal to provide food, produce high quality fish, yield a profit, or provide an example of sustainable aquaculture? When specifying the *ultimate* purpose of an organisation, we ought not to expect an objectively correct answer, but we should hope for an instructive investigation and reasonable agreement amongst stakeholders. Typically, such statements are taken to be action guiding and action requiring—once agreed to, they both demand and constrain actions by members of the organisation whom they describe. This is a feature we will suggest is shared by the purpose driven approach to work and decisions on in-person versus remote work we outline in this report. That is, this purpose driven approach yields a decision procedure for the question of the return to in-person office work.

Statements of corporate purpose are normally incorporated within a company's strategic plan in the form of a Mission or Vision Statement, or some similarly named record of purpose or intent. These can be helpful for guiding the discussion and might

even be adopted in lieu of a general discussion in cases where they are very well-framed and generally agreed and where a widespread conversation would be difficult to achieve. Apple claims that its central aim is to create products that enrich people's daily lives (Podolny & Hansen, 2020). Harvard University states that its purpose is to "educate the citizens and citizen-leaders for our society" (Harvard College, 2022). Whether Apple and Harvard operate in ways consistent with such highfalutin statements, and whether the statements themselves are really meant as summaries of an ultimate purpose are different matters; after all, the audience for mission and vision statements can be potential investors or consumers, and they can be designed for coherent branding and marketing rather than orienting the subordinate purposes of individual jobs and employees. As such, we are not proposing that vision and mission statements always contain the kind of statement of an organisation's purpose on which rest practical decisions about work arrangements. We *are* suggesting, however, that they can *sometimes* provide a starting point or substitute for the discussion, and that people within most large, modern, office-based organisations are used to hierarchical planning processes and the language and behavioural expectations that flow from them.

As the first step towards decisions about a return to the office, a discussion about corporate purpose brings important benefits. First—and most obviously—it is a condition for ensuring that subsequent discussions (about the purpose and proper conditions of particular work types and jobs) are orientated towards the good of the organisation as a whole rather than privileging certain people, jobs, skills, organisation levels, departments, and so on. To use an example adapted from Aristotle, it is easy to overlook that the purpose of oak trees is not acorns, but more oak trees.<sup>1</sup> If we overlook or become confused about the nature of an organisation's primary purpose, we can pre-emptively focus on the wrong goals, or perhaps on subordinate goals that are inconsistent with the organisation's purpose.

Second, discussions about purpose help to ensure an organisation's integrity in the sense of acting in a manner consistent with publicly stated values and goals. A properly decided and appropriately stated purpose should help to guide a wide range of organisational decisions and actions, of which decisions about a return to office work are but one example. References to organisational purpose reinforce to employees, customers, and other stakeholders, the commitment of an organisation to its ambitions.

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<sup>1</sup> Although Aristotle did not use this example himself, it has been employed by philosophers for centuries to explain his notion of "final cause" or "telos." For the original discussion, see Aristotle's *Physics* Book 9 (Aristotle, Complete Works of Aristotle, 1984, pp. 1655-1657).

Third, focusing on purpose will help to turn discussions about the return to the office away from ‘arguments from self-interest’ and arguments focused on minutiae and re-orient them towards higher-level matters in which no party has a vested interest. Fourth, this approach will simplify the process of deciding what to do about remote office work by encouraging the parties to refer to the language and substance of organisational purpose in subsequent discussions and amendments. The significance of these latter two advantages will be especially clear during discussions between staff at disparate levels of an organisation regarding work arrangements for various roles and jobs. Only if decisions can be framed in terms of objective, justified and consistent reasoning and language might complaints of favouritism and unfairness be averted or minimised, and only if the circumstances of individual employees can be understood in terms of the wider purpose might a broad policy be reconciled with particular cases. For a small business that relies on its existing staff, this might be especially important. There would be no point deciding upon an in-office policy if it were to motivate critical and experienced staff to leave. The purpose-focused approach puts the organisation in the best position to evaluate and incorporate these lower-level considerations.<sup>2</sup>

Once the primary purpose has been determined, the next step is to identify how the different roles within the organisation serve that purpose.<sup>3</sup> For example, if the purpose of an organisation like Harvard is to educate citizens, we can ask of each role, “how does it contribute to the education of citizens?” This does not mean that each role will contribute *directly* to that purpose. The builder, electrician, cleaner and administrator who helps to set up, maintain, and schedule classrooms does not, strictly speaking, educate a student, yet each role is necessary for education to be realised correctly. It is in this sense that each of these roles is *subordinate* to the organisational purpose.

Naturally, then, the purpose of different kinds of office work will vary from one organisation to the next *and* amongst and between jobs within the same organisation. Consider the office-based employees of a university, for example: what is the purpose of their work? Given the diversity of jobs in a university (ranging from lecturers and researchers to administrators and senior managers, and from casual employees to long-term permanent staff), there are many different secondary purposes contributing

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<sup>2</sup> Sander for instance makes the strong claim that ‘what is certain is we don’t need to be together five days a week to make...things happen. With a shrinking workforce and an increasing war for talent, employers who don’t provide flexibility will be the losers’ (2022). On our view, while this may be true of some, and maybe even many, businesses, it may not be true of all. One would first need to understand the purpose of a business, on our view, before arriving at such a conclusion.

<sup>3</sup> The question of whether there is “highest” purpose (or end) to which all actions contribute is a matter about which we remain agnostic (Tenenbaum, 2021, p. 75).

to the university's fundamental purpose. It is only by analysing the contributions of each role that we can address questions of whether, under what conditions, and how much remote work is the best option.

Reductionist models which focus upon what *all* staff are obliged to do (typical of policy documents) can fail to engage with the specific attributes and purposes of particular jobs, types of work, and tasks. A more granular approach will promote more effective decision making *and* better understanding of particular roles. For example, discussions about the purpose of course designer jobs might prompt the idea that creative and engaging courses promote a university's purpose better than less engaging ones, and that creative collaboration between designers is promoted by immediate and ad hoc exchanges of ideas. That realisation might in turn lead to recognition that physical co-location helps to produce engaging course content, countering a pre-conception that course design is the kind of work that can (and perhaps should) be produced by someone working remotely.

### **APPLYING THE PURPOSE-FOCUSED APPROACH**

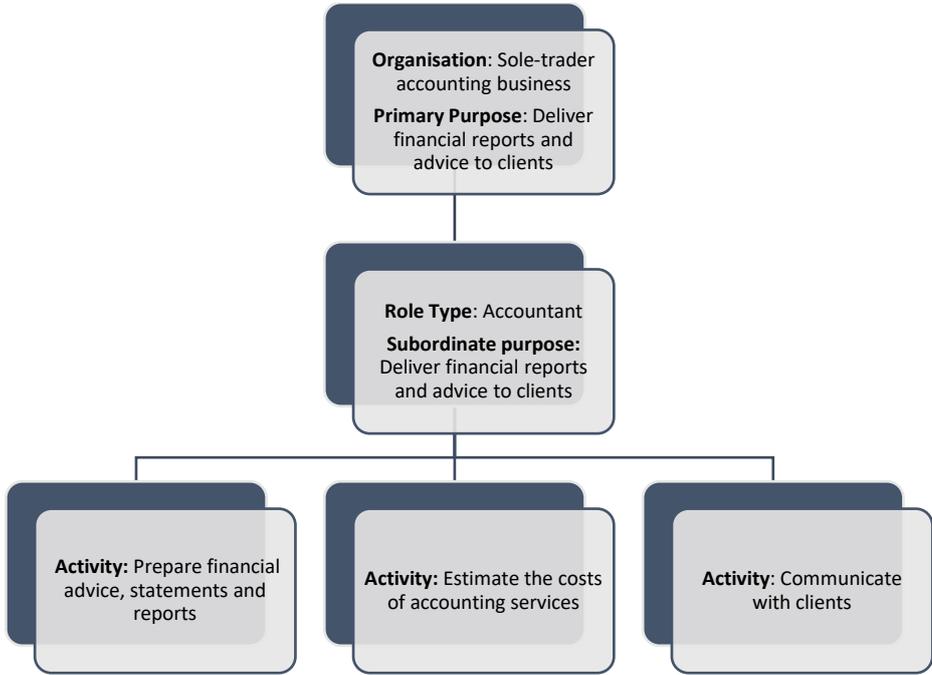
Establishing the fundamental purpose of the organisation and the contribution of each job (or job type, role type, or work type, depending on the organisational structure) to that purpose is the crucial first step for reorienting discussions about a return to in-person office work. Rather than locating reasons for one's position amongst personal preferences or perceptions of how the job has been performed previously, the discussion will be about how the job contributes to the organisation's fundamental purpose. If that contribution requires being present in an office, then the threshold decision is made, and the discussion can move on to the conditions associated with a return to the office. But if it does *not* entail being in the office necessarily, or if only some aspects of the job require attendance at the office, then the discussion will turn towards a different set of empirical questions designed to maximise the benefits that stakeholders have realised from home-based work.

We will deal with such empirical questions in section 5, but first we will use three examples to clarify the initial steps that shift the discussion away from the kinds of ad hoc reasoning cited by Google, Microsoft and others as reasons for their decisions towards a more systematic and properly founded approach. In each of the three examples, we consider whether or not the particular *role type* necessitates working in an office environment by first identifying the primary purpose of the organisation, then locating the role's corresponding contribution to the organisation purpose (the subordinate purpose/s), before finally specifying the particular activities that realise that contribution. An electrician's purpose is to provide functional electrical wiring systems, but an electrician working at Harvard's campus ought to consider what is required of her to help achieve the organisation's primary purpose, which is educated

citizens: this will be her job’s subordinate purpose.<sup>4</sup> In some cases (as with Example 1) this analysis is straightforwardly sufficient to decide whether office work is required; in others, it will be insufficient, leading directly to the empirical questions that must be answered in order to decide the correct course of action.

**Example 1 – an accountant operating as a ‘sole trader’ accounting business.** The purpose-focused analysis of this case is straightforward but illustrates the method’s crucial first steps. Consider an accounting business comprising just the business owner. What is the ultimate purpose of an accounting business? Perhaps we could agree that it is to provide sound financial advice and produce reports on the finances of organisations. As the operation comprises just one person and one role, the subordinate purpose (the purpose of the role type) is the same as the organisation’s.

The illustration below indicates how these roles in this case might map onto the primary and subordinate purpose layout we have outlined above.

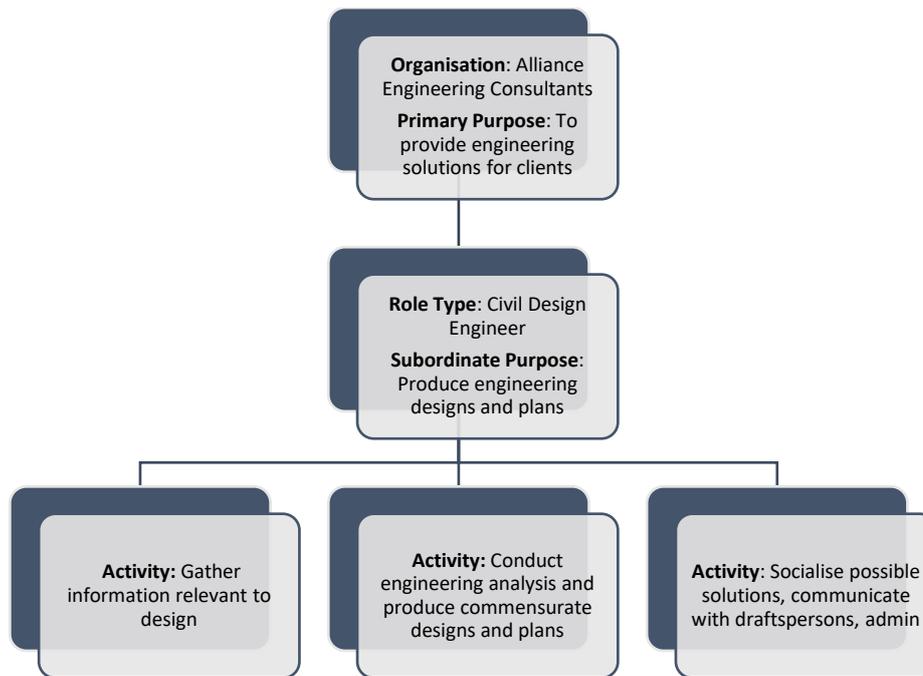



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<sup>4</sup> This raises a difficult question about contractors, and whether their own purposes are subordinate to the organisation’s.

The three main activities listed under the ‘role type’ nodes are essential for fulfilling the purpose of accounting—in this case, to deliver financial reports and advice to clients. The next question is, then, how effective the accountant would be if she performed these activities remotely (e.g. at home)? Can reports and statements of advice be completed in the home office in a way that helps fulfil the accounting practice’s purpose? Clearly the answer is ‘yes’: financial reports and statement can easily be completed from an accountant’s home, and the data required can be obtained and transmitted by electronic means. The case is especially simple because the example involves a one-person accounting practice, so that there would be no need for effective communication with co-workers. As such, the essential purpose of the organisation can be realised by the employee working from home, paving the way for empirical considerations of how best to realise that arrangement.

***Example 2 – civil design engineer.*** The second example is that of a knowledge worker, a category of work that encompasses a vast array of roles from a variety of fields, including researchers, logicians, engineers, academics, writers, consultants, commercial analysts, and so on. Consider a civil design engineer who works for an engineering company, such as Alliance Engineering. To determine whether this role type is suitable for remote office work, we begin by determining the ultimate purpose of the organisation in which it is employed. It might be useful to consider first the company’s mission statement, notwithstanding the need to be wary of terminology and claims that extend beyond specifying the organisation’s primary purpose. According to Alliance’s mission statement, the company’s goal is to “be recognised as the market leader in providing innovative and specialised structural engineering and lifting operations solutions.” (Alliance Engineering Consultants Pty Ltd, 2022). Although we might ‘read past’ the matter of market leadership, the mission statement is helpful because it clearly states the organisation’s primary purpose: to provide engineering solutions. All the roles within the organisation are meant to contribute to that purpose. A civil design engineer will analyse engineering requirements and contribute designs and plans that will meet those requirements, ready for implementation. The simplified picture is like this:



When considering the question of whether remote office work would be appropriate for Alliance’s civil design engineers, it is important to weight the main activities that constitute the role more highly than minor elements. For example, it might be that Alliance’s design engineers are sometimes required to attend ad hoc meetings with management, and it will be necessary for those conducting the analysis to decide whether that requirement is sufficiently significant as to impact upon the decision about the need to attend the office. In fact, those kinds of meeting are unlikely to be very important to the role and can be conducted via electronic means in any case, and so ought not to be weighted heavily in the analysis.

In our simplified example, there are just three activities decisive for the decision about a return to the office. The first is to gather relevant information: a civil design engineer needs to know what the client wants, what the budget is, and so on, and needs to develop a relationship with the lead engineer and perhaps with the client, too. Can these activities be conducted from a location that is remote from the office? There is a temptation to answer very quickly, ‘yes’. On face value, the nature of the task is amenable to the availability and transmissibility of information via electronic means. The past few decades have seen improvement in internet speed, information available online (including engineering standards and legislative requirements), and large-scale adoption of email and on-line meeting technologies (notwithstanding that remote work is a learned skill (see Pozen and Samuel 2021, p. 11), so that additional training may be needed for the design engineer’s efficient use of the technology).

But that is not the end of the story: not all methods of achieving a goal are equally fit for purpose. A bicycle and a car are both ways for travelling from Sydney to

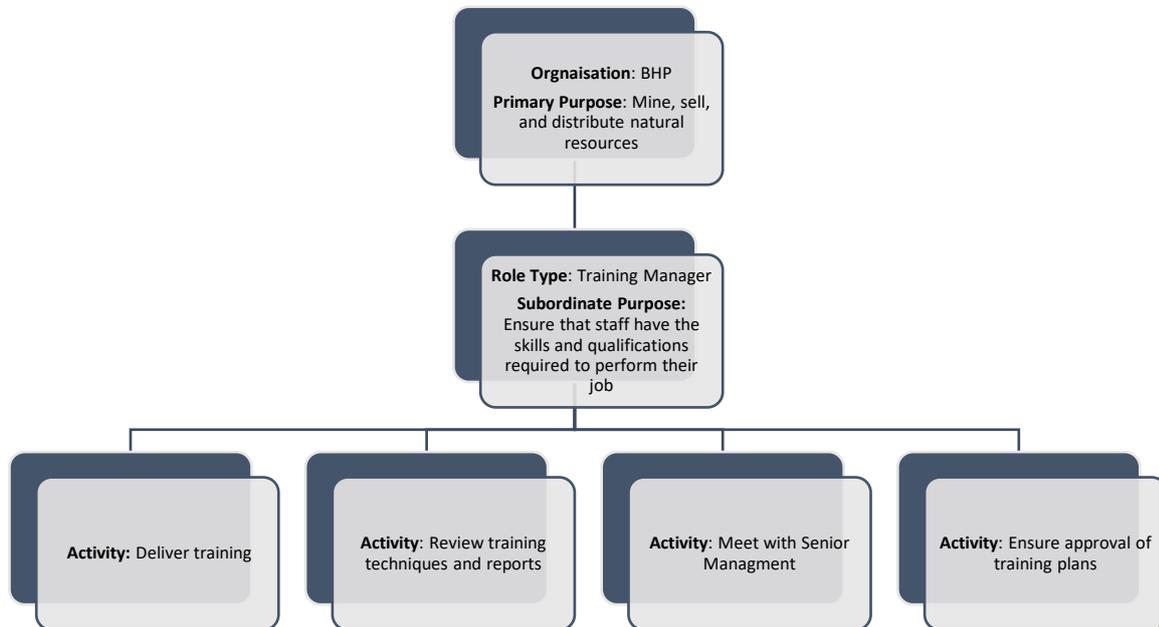
Melbourne for example, but if the purpose is to get there quickly and with minimal effort, then a bicycle will fail to serve the purpose. There are always evaluative judgments to be made to decide between means of achieving our goals. In our example, we might consider the first activity *in terms of* the third: it might be that there is something very important about immediate interpersonal exchanges between an engineer and a draftsman that requires them to be in the same place, leaning over one another's shoulder, making amendments on CAD software. Perhaps the process is better organised and communicated when both parties are in the office, since one advantage of office work is that having everyone in the same place can help to solve certain types of organisational problems (Pozen & Samuel, 2021, p. 11).

Similarly, considering the second activity in terms of the first, it might be that the engineer's analysis and design work benefits very greatly from visiting the site to view first-hand the surrounding engineering structures and infrastructure. Such a visit might even tip-off the engineer that maintenance practices are not quite as sound as specified in the design brief, so that her design ought to be more robust and therefore more costly than she expected. In other words, only by considering *how* each activity is *best* conducted can the purpose-focused analysis guide a proper decision about *where* it ought to be conducted. There might be very good reasons why certain practices (like site visits) have become routine amongst engineers.

It will be clear from this example that making a correct decision about having knowledge workers return to the office requires careful and sometimes complicated analysis so that the nature of the role or job is properly linked to fulfilment of an organisation's purpose. In only the very simplest cases is there a place for simplistic claims about employee 'flexibility' or a 'gut feel' that employees ought to spend three days per week in the office.

**Example 3 – training manager.** Our third and final example involves a training manager in a large mining company (say, BHP) that has an enormous workforce, international operations, and disparate operating divisions, each with their own mission statement and production facilities. Such characteristics seem at first blush to complicate the process advocated here. Again, the formally enunciated vision statement might be a helpful place to begin an assessment of the suitability of home-based work for any particular job: "Our purpose is to bring people and resources together to build a better world" (BHPa, 2022). In this case, however, the statement is too imprecise for our purposes, and so we might turn to another portion of BHP's formal planning structure called "What we do" (BHPb, 2022): "We're focused on the resources the world needs to grow and decarbonise sustainably" (BHPb, 2022) From this statement, combined with a basic knowledge of BHP's business, it is possible to derive a statement of the kind that we require, perhaps something like: "To mine, sell, and distribute natural resources required as inputs for the manufacture of goods and infrastructure." The subordinate purpose of a training manager in such an organisation is to ensure that staff have the requisite skills and qualifications to perform their

operational roles safely and legally, requiring a range of administrative and operational activities:



The question of whether the training manager ought to spend all of her time in the office or move instead to a hybrid arrangement will turn on whether and how well the activities can be performed away from the office. Whether or not the first activity—training delivery—can be performed remotely will depend on the kind of training involved, trainee access to on-line training facilities, the need for employees to exhibit or practice their skills on actual (rather than virtual) equipment, and so on. For example, some informational content for the training of haul truck drivers can be distributed electronically but the final (and requisite) test of one’s ability to drive a loaded vehicle involves driving a loaded vehicle! As technology changes, so might this requirement, but for now, there is simply no substitute (not even a sophisticated simulator) for an experienced trainer assessing a truck driver by riding alongside them in the cab. In contrast, the fourth task (ensuring that training plans are approved) can be done perfectly well by remote means. As such, the training manager might be a candidate for the hybrid model.

This section has not provided definitive answers with respect to whether and under what conditions particular role types are capable of being performed away from the office, and the conditions required to do so. Rather, it has sketched the *structure* of a decision-making process that we believe illuminates and prioritises the most important considerations in making such decisions, particularly clarifying the relationship between the (subordinate) purpose of any particular role and the (primary)

organisational purpose to which the role contributes. To go further requires a detailed review of each work type, the activities that it entails, and the best ways of performing those activities. The hierarchical assignment of activity to role to purpose is not enough: detailed empirical review is required, too. But although the method advocated here will result, finally, in turning to matters of detail, it is important to note that it is *relevant* detail—detail that is significant for aligning the purpose of a role or job with the purpose of an organisation—and not merely what some party to the decision *deems to be* significant. In other words, the process has guided and oriented the discussion towards matters that are objectively justified.

## **EMPIRICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

One essential trait of successful managers is the ability to decide how much detailed analysis is required to make a good decision. In some cases, an intuitive or basic understanding of the situation is sufficient; in others, a detailed and sophisticated analysis is unavoidable. This is true of the question of remote work arrangements, too. Taking the case of the design engineer (Example 2), it might be enough for her manager to know that she is typically well organised, simply brilliant at CAD work, competent in the use of Zoom to stay in touch with her peers, and sufficiently experienced at making site visits to decide that she will need to spend very little time in the office. Perhaps the manager's experience of her work in the past two years of working at home has revealed that there is no strong reason to have the design engineer return to the office at all. At the same time, a less experienced, less well-organised person doing the same kind of job might require supervision that is only available in the office.

By contrast, the case of the BHP Training Manager in Example 3 might be decided by someone who is making a general policy for Training Managers across a diverse set of operations and without any knowledge of a particular staff member. The decision maker might require a great deal of empirical information to make the policy and define exceptions to it, or to decide who is best placed amongst subordinates to implement the policy. In such a case, a formal role profile and personal performance appraisal might be required of everyone performing similar roles. There is, simply, no 'one size fits all' way in which the methodology proposed here ought to be implemented, since the correct application will turn on an understanding of relevant empirical considerations.

At the most basic level, such considerations include the capabilities of people performing roles to adapt to, learn, and utilise technologies that substitute for in-person engagements. Someone entirely unfamiliar with on-line meeting software and unwilling or unable to learn how to use it will probably have to return to the office, even though their role is otherwise well suited for remote work. If an employer determines that a person's home will not or cannot reasonably be adapted to provide a safe ergonomic environment, then it will be best (perhaps even legally required) to

direct them to return to the office. Perhaps the working relationship between two managers entails so many momentary and unplanned conversations that their being in the office together is crucial for the subordinate purpose of each role. Such lower-level considerations might not be encountered until the very final step in the methodology proposed here—perhaps even at the point of implementation planning—but they are none the less important for that.

If a hybrid approach is adopted, some empirical evaluation will be needed to determine the ratio of work to be conducted in the office to time spent at home or at an operational site. Again, the precision and accuracy required will vary depending on the circumstances (the scale of the business, the need for consistency across people performing similar work, the number and range of activities performed, the fact that a previous decision about the matter has been more or less successful, and so on) but harmony between those affected by the decision will be encouraged by an agreed data source and method of analysis, and conduct of the evaluation in terms of the primary purpose, subordinate purpose, and activity type involved.

There are also a range of empirical matters that will inform decisions regarding a range of organisations, jobs, and work types. For example, it is important that decision makers understand the relative efficacy of in-person communication relative to on-line communication and the relative consequences of each for the requisite organisational culture. What are the impacts of the two types on inter-personal trust, relationship building, and clear messaging? Is there a period of time at which point relationships conducted remotely begin to fail? Are there ways for improving the conduct of on-line communication, perhaps worthy of formal training? Is it the case that discussions about disciplinary matters are better conducted face-to-face, whereas more transactional communications are suited to Zoom? If communication to a large group is required, is that best realised remotely, near the communal kitchen, in a neutral environment (one to which all participants are alien), or in the office of a particular person (such as the most senior person)? Research on such matters ought not just to be considered at the time of the initial decision, but during reviews of existing arrangements, too.

## **RELATED PUBLIC POLICY ISSUES**

To this point, we have considered the matter of returning to office work in terms of particular businesses and roles (or jobs) and the short-term practicalities of a challenge that emerged from responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. But if our focus shifts to the socio-economic context in which work is conducted, then it becomes apparent that the public policy and regulatory environments are relevant, too. For example, the industrial relations system is likely to have some say in how discussions between employees and employers will be conducted, how decisions will be enforced and amended, and how fundamental conditions of employment will be preserved.

But the relationship is not uni-directional: decisions about the nature and conditions of a return to office work across industries and whole economies will impact upon public policy, too. Home-based work has highlighted (or perhaps merely confirmed) the extent to which electronic tools can facilitate fundamentally different means and modes of work. The continued emergence of new technologies will force us to confront questions about how and why we work as we do. McKinsey Global Institute has predicted that 45 million Americans will lose their jobs to automation by 2030 (Carey, 2021). What will this mean for the future of work? If work fulfills a basic human need, then ought we to fear such a prediction and yearn after a return to the office to be alongside other people? Or ought we instead to hope that changing technology might bring a long-cherished utopia of post-work humanity, freeing many from the tyranny of casual and piecework required for economic survival, and perhaps even providing a Universal Basic Income that liberates people to pursue more projects and interests outside of work (education, volunteering, developing relationships and the like)?<sup>5</sup>

The shift to home work as a response to the pandemic has also raised questions about how we ought to prioritise the health of employees relative to a well-functioning and prosperous economy. Whereas initially the focus by employers and governments was to have people work from home to minimise health risks (and the consequent load on health systems), talk soon turned to whether the mental health risks associated with a less socially engaging home environment indicated a need to return to the office. Implicit in this discussion was that employee health and economic prosperity are capable of being traded-off, as though they are somehow equivalent, or are both ‘ends in themselves,’ a misunderstanding that was encouraged by talking about the ‘health’ of the economy in direct comparison to the ‘health’ of individuals.

In addition, there remain difficult questions about what employees do in fact value about their work, how easily people will be able to navigate changes in the labour market, whether or not new kinds of jobs will be desirable, and so on. Such questions will undoubtedly be dealt with in part by governments. Public policy has an incredibly important role in shaping societies and workplaces. In the same way that the GI Bill helped to achieve a significant increase in equality and prosperity in twentieth century America by enabling many working-class soldiers to enter tertiary education and professions, so imaginative public policy responses to post-pandemic economic and social welfare might radically shape individual and collective flourishing.

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<sup>5</sup> One interesting question unaddressed in this paper is the tacit experiment in UBI conducted through ‘Jobseeker’ and other Australian Government programs during 2021.

Furthermore, the public policy implications of whether or not we see a return to in-person office work as the 'default' mode of working will extend to average wage levels and their consequences for income tax bases and general economic activity levels (Poleg, 2021). There will be significant implications for public infrastructure planning resulting from reductions in regular, high-volume commuting to central hubs and commensurate increases in the number of people working from home in the suburbs during the day (e.g., the possibility of reduced spending on roads and hub-and-spoke public transport systems offset by increased spending on internet infrastructure and the power network). Unless planning and decision-making around such matters are informed by the fundamental patterns of work, there is a risk that they will be framed by either contingent issues such as those driving the current debate, or else by inappropriate but familiar concepts like shareholder value and corporate interests. Although such matters go far beyond the scope of this paper, they ought to be kept in mind as its crucial and significant background context.

## **CONCLUSION**

Decisions about whether and how to return to in-person office work are urgent, significant for a range of organisational and social reasons, and likely to be revisited as the Covid pandemic progresses and (hopefully) abates. Agile responses will also be needed as the world faces the ebb and flow of what can be sharp changes produced by variants such as the Omicron variant that emerged in late 2021. While the range of potential approaches to the matter is readily identifiable in general terms, choosing an appropriate option and deciding precisely how it ought to be implemented is another matter. On the evidence of decisions taken by some of the highest profile companies, there is little agreement about an appropriate decision-making methodology and the factors that ought to be accounted for in applying it. Their decisions rely on assessments of what is likely to be considered reasonable (or merely acceptable) for the parties involved, coupled with prospects for improved efficiency and employee satisfaction.

Taking our lead from Aristotle's concept of telos, we propose instead a methodology that is strictly purpose oriented. By aligning the decision about a return to work with the fundamental purpose of work, individual roles, and a business overall, it is possible to ensure that new work arrangements will be consistent with the organisation's reason for being. In some cases, it will be difficult for parties to the decision to agree on such a statement of purpose; in others it will be relatively straightforward. But once that threshold statement of purpose is decided, the way is clear to assess each job (or work type) to decide whether it might be conducted away from the office and under what conditions. Only by considering the contribution of the job to the organisation's purpose is it possible to decide upon and resolve the *appropriate* empirical questions rather than those that seem most urgent or important to the parties involved.

The purpose-focused methodology we have outlined here is superior to the alternatives in two important ways. First, discussions about the purpose of the organisation and the roles that comprise it are likely to promote greater communication between staff at all levels, particularly between managers and non-managers. On the one hand, such a productive discussion will always be beneficial for organisational culture, integrity, and decision making. On the other, it ensures that decisions made about remote work are based on shared conceptions of what particular roles and jobs are meant to contribute. If a manager denies an employee's request to work from home as a result of a decision process grounded in shared agreements about purpose and verifiable empirical details about roles and tasks, then there is a transparent, non-arbitrary reason for the decision (and one that is subject to important natural justice claims such as equity, justification and review). Recent literature has highlighted the benefits of managerial transparency for organisational culture and coherence (Dalio, 2017). Arbitrary decisions and shifting bases for key decisions are notorious for damaging morale within an organisation, whereas decisions based on a clear and consistently applied methodology and verifiable facts are likely to improve it (Weakliem & Frenkel, 2006, p. 335). A clearly enunciated decision-making methodology conveys the message to all concerned that decisions are justified and unbiased, and provides a framework for how the message is communicated.

Second, the purpose-focused approach can be repeated as circumstances change, providing a reliable, consistent, and (in the longer-term) enculturated methodology. The alternative is to call upon new opinions, biases, and expectations each time a return to work is revisited or the suitability of a job for remote work arrangements is reassessed. As organisations change, so too might their primary purpose and subordinate role types. The purpose-focused approach will help companies map these changing relationships using iterations of the same process rather than having to change the basic approach or language.

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