

Human Resource Management and The Great Unlearning

By Ben Baran, Ph.D., Agility Analytics Practice Leader



Exciting changes in the world of human resources (HR) abound. As noted by Stephen Barley (University of California Santa Barbara), Beth Bechky, and Frances Milliken (both of New York University) in their recent [article](#) in *Academy of Management Discoveries*,

“Few people would deny that the nature of work and employment has changed over the last four decades, not only in the United States but in many countries worldwide. Moreover, the nature of work is likely to continue to change as we move further into the 21st century.”

Such changes make HR work continually dynamic, with evolving practices with regard to new technologies, the increasing prevalence of contingent workers, and more. Barley and his coauthors also mention the rise of artificial intelligence and the rise of project-based work as fundamental shifts that will influence careers and even how people think about themselves in relation to their organizations and society.

These changes alone are enough to keep HR leaders and other executives up at night.

Yet I wonder if there are additional, perhaps even more fundamental shifts underway that will forever alter how people behave and interact at work.

Those changes have to do with a recognition of the ingenious beauty of human organizing, the remarkable capacity that we all have to iterate toward something better, and the foolishness—and downright arrogance—that can accompany our best managerial attempts to control.

Teams and organizations are increasingly finding benefits in valuing:

- Individuals and interactions over processes and tools
- Working [solutions] over comprehensive documentation
- Customer collaboration over contract negotiation
- Responding to change over following a plan

If those values look familiar, you’ve likely seen them in the [Agile Manifesto](#), which includes these values and a set of principles for software development.

But here’s the thing—these values and principles have been around for decades prior to their articulation in the Agile Manifesto. That’s because they’re based in how people actually work, not in how various management systems of the 20th Century forced them to obey.

As noted in The Wharton School's Aug. 1 article, [Has Agile Management's Moment Arrived?](#),

"The agile approach is one that uses teams to work through a process designed to respond to unpredictability; that allows for and encourages changes in direction; that gives teams great authority and transparency; and that builds in customer or user response to the end product or service while it is still being developed."

Because agile management thrives in a state of uncertainty, it is highly likely to continue to spread into other sectors and functions, far beyond that of software development.

Case in point: General Electric, which has been implementing similar principles for the past few years with regard to its manufacturing—within a program called "[FastWorks](#)."

And given that agile methods, including those advocated by [Scrum](#), are continuing to increase in popularity, I see a tremendous opportunity—and threat—ahead for the world of HR.

Namely, in successful organizations, HR will be a central component of what I'm starting to think of as "The Great Unlearning."

The Great Unlearning is what's required of organizations that are fundamentally committed to a different way of working, a way that's characterized by how humans actually interact best.

Going back to Barley and his coauthors' recent work, in addition to discussing fundamental shifts in the world of work, they also astutely highlight how most of management knowledge and practice comes from research and assumptions developed decades ago. They write:

"... it is surprising how little organization and management studies have had to say about the phenomenon. Our field's lack of attention to the ways in which work is changing is problematic because organization studies and organizational behavior grew out of industrial sociology and industrial and organizational psychology in the 1960s and 1970s."

For HR leaders, The Great Unlearning means that they will have to undo much of what we have taken for granted as management dogma. For example, if an organization does much of its work based upon project-based teamwork, what might that mean in terms of:

- The employer relationship—will there be much of a need for permanent employees in the future?
- Compensation—what is the value of hourly wages if results are truly project-based?
- Recruiting and selection—how do you find people who can perform in an interdependent, team-based environment?
- Development—how do you help the millions of workers who are deeply accustomed to traditional ways of working adapt to new structures and ways of working? How do you help an organization nurture a culture in which new values matter more than those of the past?
- And much more.

The Great Unlearning for HR also includes HR as a profession taking a hard look at itself in the mirror. Although people have been preaching—rightly, in my opinion—about how HR needs to transform for the past two decades (Dave Ulrich's 1998 Harvard Business Review [article](#) comes to mind), has it really happened?

In most organizations that I know, HR is still the compliance department, the place where you go to find out about your benefits, the people who give you stuff to sign. In today's business

environment, HR must unlearn its own ways of working. HR must also help organizations unlearn the behaviors that have been taken-for-granted by employees since the Industrial Revolution.

In short, it seems that The Great Unlearning for HR includes both a threat and an opportunity for HR leaders.

It's threatening for HR leaders who prefer to maintain the status quo.

It's an opportunity for HR leaders who are willing to take the risks necessary to make their organizations primed for the future.



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