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Talent Management

Designing Work That People Love

by Marcus Buckingham

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Summary. Resignations are at an all-time high, and companies desperate to fill

vacancies are trying everything from pay raises to trendy perks. But those interventions are falling short, because the real problem, as the author explains, is that so many jobs are stressful,... [more](#)

As record numbers of people have quit their jobs, all sectors of the economy are struggling to fill vacancies. To get people back to work, organizations are changing long-standing policies and offering unprecedented incentives. Transportation companies, for example, have upped their wages to lure long-haul drivers back into truck cabs. California public schools are allowing retired teachers to return to work without recertification. CEOs and CHROs are falling all over themselves to offer flex-time work arrangements more attractive than those of their competitors. But such attempts miss the fundamental problem.



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Simply put, work isn't working for us. It wasn't before the pandemic, and it isn't now. According to surveys my colleagues and I have conducted at ADP Research Institute (ADPRI), before the pandemic only 18% of respondents were fully engaged at work, 17% felt highly resilient at work, and 14% trusted their senior leaders and team leader. The Centers for Disease Control reported in 2018 that 71% of adults had at least one symptom of workplace stress, such as headaches or feeling overwhelmed or anxious.

The pandemic has added even more pressure to our existing pain. Engagement and resilience are at all-time lows, having each dropped two percentage points during the course of the pandemic. (That may sound like a small change, but given how low those figures already were and the size of the samples, it is both statistically and practically significant.) Meanwhile, a quarter of U.S. workers quit their jobs in 2021—a historic high.

This points to a problem that increasing wages or simplifying professional on-ramps alone won't solve, although those efforts certainly help improve employees' quality of life. We know this because in ADPRI's most recent 50,000-person surveys of stratified random samples of working populations around the world, the most powerful predictors of retention, performance, engagement, resilience, and inclusion did not include pay or liking one's colleagues or work location or even a strong belief in the mission of the organization. All those provided some explanatory power, but none was as significant as these three items:

- Was I excited to work every day last week?
- Did I have a chance to use my strengths every day?
- At work do I get a chance to do what I'm good at and something I love?

These results, neuroscience research, and my decades of experience working with individuals in organizations strongly suggest that only when a company intelligently links what people love to their actual activities will it achieve higher performance, higher engagement and resilience, and lower turnover.

To stem the tide and to attract and retain the best people, then, we must redesign jobs around a simple but powerful concept: love for the content of the work itself. That word may seem strong in this context, but people's affinity for their work can and should reach this level, and when it does, amazing things can happen.

Creating a place where all people can find love in their work means incorporating three principles in everything your business does: *The people are the point*. Employees, rather than customers or shareholders, are the most important stakeholders in your organization. *One size fits one*. Each of those employees is a unique person with distinct loves, interests, and skills. *In trust we grow*. For employees to discover and contribute their loves at work, leaders must explicitly make trust the foundation of all practices and policies.

We'll take a look at how the most forward-thinking companies are beginning to implement each of these in turn. But first let's examine why love is so important in the workplace and what companies have missed by ignoring it.

What's Love Got to Do with It?

When you're in love with another person, your brain chemistry changes. We don't yet know the exact biochemical cause of romantic love—it appears to be some combination of oxytocin, dopamine, norepinephrine, and vasopressin. But research does reveal that when you're engaged in an activity you love, that same chemical cocktail is present in your brain—along with anandamide, which brings you feelings of joy and wonder.

Primed by this cocktail, you interact with the world differently. Research by neurobiologists suggests that these “love chemicals” lessen the regulatory function of your neocortex, widening your perspective on yourself and liberating your mind to accept new thoughts and feelings. You register other people’s emotions more intensely. You remember details more vividly. You perform cognitive tasks faster and better. You are more optimistic, more loyal, more forgiving, and more open to new information and experiences. One could say that doing what you love makes you more effective, but it’s so much more than that: You’re on fire without the burnout.

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So if you’re doing work you love, work need not be a stressor but can instead be a source of energy and resilience. Indeed, ADPRI data on engagement shows that people who find love, strength, joy, and excitement in what they do each day are far more likely to be productive, to stay at the company longer than others do, and to sustain themselves in the face of life’s inevitable challenges. Finding love in work, therefore, is not self-indulgent or narcissistic; it is a precursor and an amplifier of performance.

To be clear, that’s not quite the same as saying that work must consist exclusively of what you love. We have no data proving that the most productive and engaged people at work love *all* they do.

What it points to, though, is that if leaders want their employees to be high performing, to stay with the organization, and to be engaged and resilient, they should be intentional in helping them find love in some of what they do, every day.

Data from the Mayo Clinic reinforces this finding and suggests that 20% is a useful threshold. Its research into burnout in doctors and nurses suggests that if less than 20% of your work consists of things you love to do, you are far more likely to experience physical and psychological burnout. Intriguingly, loving *more* than 20% doesn't seem to net much increase in resilience. A little love of what you do at work goes a long, long way.

For many of us, finding even that level of love in our work is challenging. Perhaps daunted by the sheer range of where employees can find love, or perhaps distrustful of their intentions, or perhaps presuming that “no one could love this job,” many managers have designed loveless work, in which the job is defined by standardized steps or required competencies, and success is measured by how closely the employee conforms to them. Distribution-center work and delivery-driver roles usually fall into this category.

It's neither fair nor realistic to put the onus on employees who are faced with jobs like those—and with the need to put food on the table—to find the love in what they do, although it's clear from my decades of research into all manner of jobs that people can find love in surprising places. I've interviewed a manufacturing worker who loved to figure out the “personality” of each of the machines he operated and intervene right before one of them “chose” to break down. I've done focus groups with boron miners

who revealed passions as diverse as a love of precision, the thrill of figuring out how to go a hundred days without even the most minor safety incident, and simply being part of a team. Slaughterhouse work, long-haul trucking, housekeeping—all these jobs include a range of activities specific enough to serve as the raw material for some love of the work. The fact that we haven't designed those jobs through the lens of people with specific preferences and passions doesn't mean there's no love to be found there.

So let's turn to organizations. It's time to start designing jobs with love in mind. If leaders were to take all this data to heart and deliberately try to create what I call a Love + Work organization, in which a greater percentage of employees find love in what they do—even if only 20% of the time—how would they proceed? They would make sure that engaged and resilient people were uplifted rather than depleted by their jobs, and as a result delivered better services and products to their customers and made more-sustainable commitments to their communities. Although I know of no one organization today that fully embodies the Love + Work ideal, plenty are beginning to implement pieces of the three core principles.

The People Are the Point

A true Love + Work organization is built on a recognition of and commitment to the fundamental importance of each person who comes to work. This stance represents an advance on both Milton Friedman's shareholder capitalism, which held that an organization's sole purpose is to maximize shareholder value, *and*

Joseph Stiglitz's stakeholder capitalism, which introduced the idea that organizations should also maximize value to customers, employees, and the broader community.

A Love + Work organization sees employees as the *integrating point* for all other stakeholders rather than as merely one of many. They are, after all, where the work actually happens—where the value in products or for customers is created. That requires that every employee be seen as a full human being, not just a cog in the machine. Specifically, Love + Work organizations do the following:

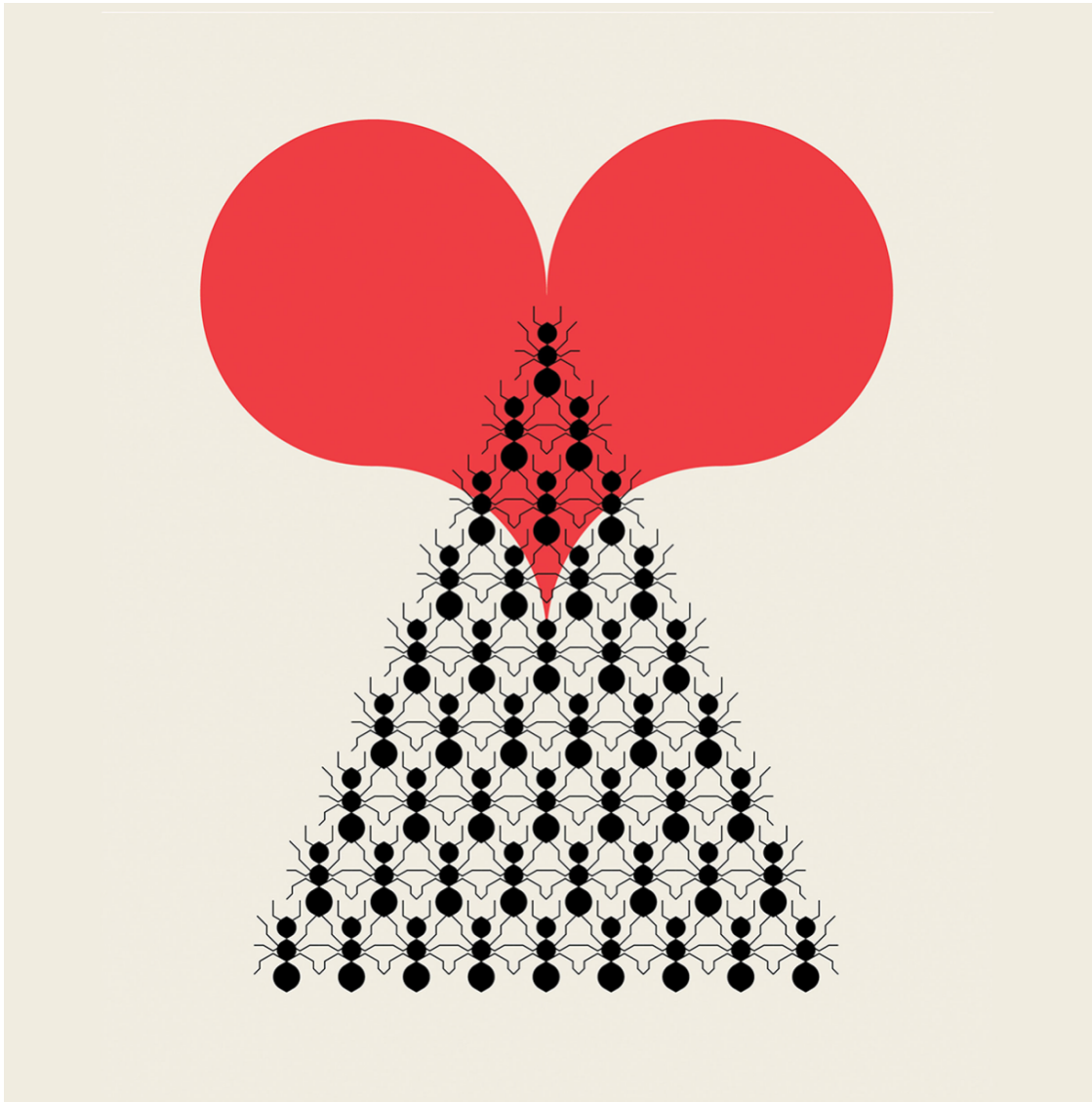
Recruit human beings, not workers. In a more human-centric approach to onboarding, these companies are rigorous and detailed in explaining why each candidate was selected and what specific strengths and loves they saw in the person, including but also going beyond how those can add value to the overall mission of the organization.

Lululemon is a leader in this. During the company's onboarding process, new employees are encouraged to set goals, both career *and* personal. Employees are equally celebrated whether their goal is to become the company's CEO or to start their own fashion brand sometime in the future. This focus on the person's unique ambitions during onboarding helps lululemon's 90-day retention and first-year employee-engagement levels rise twice as high as industry averages.

Commit to lifelong learning. A Love + Work organization invests in the ongoing education of each employee. That might be in the form of direct payment for college degrees, as at Amazon,

Walmart, and others; or forgiving and reimbursing student loans, as Geico, Starbucks, and UPS do; or giving employees a certain amount of discretionary time to pursue their own projects, as Google has periodically done over the years. All these efforts communicate explicitly that the employee's growth and development have intrinsic worth, even if it doesn't immediately accrue to the organization.

Support alumni. A Love + Work organization has a formal and carefully considered offboarding program that reinforces the message that people's worth as human beings extends far beyond their time with the organization. Many companies, including Accenture and McKinsey, have found that staying close to a strong alumni community offers practical benefits in the form of existing client growth and referrals. But it's also a way for organizations to show their commitment to each employee as a person.



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Again, lululemon stands out here. The company's willingness to stay connected to, and support, former employees has created a nexus of entrepreneurial companies in Vancouver, spanning multiple industries including apparel, food services, and fitness. Many employees who depart to pursue dreams of opening a studio or a gym later become "ambassadors," their pictures proudly displayed in local lululemon stores to showcase their new ventures. This demonstrates to current employees how deeply

invested the company is in the ongoing success of those who came before them—whether or not that success is within the confines of the company.

One Size Fits One

Brain science reveals that there are more synaptic connections in each human brain than there are stars in 5,000 Milky Ways, resulting in endless variations in how we all think and feel. It shouldn't be surprising, therefore, that people in the same job love and do their work very differently. An organization dedicated to love builds its people practices around that fact. To help people pinpoint their particular pattern of loves and loathings and channel them into contribution, an organization must empower teams and team leaders to make the most of each employee's uniqueness.

Different Ways to Love the Same Job

As part of its ongoing study of excellence at work, ADPRI does primary qualitative research involving top ...



Avoid tools that standardize. Competency models, feedback tools, and rigid career paths, which have become the norm at most large companies today, replace employees' personal loves with cookie-cutter actions or behaviors. At Love + Work organizations, in contrast, each role is defined by a very few

measured outcomes rather than by a competency model. Thus hotel general managers are measured according to occupancy levels and guest satisfaction ratings. Nurses are held accountable for patient outcomes and patient satisfaction scores. Salespeople are measured by sales volume and client growth. And so on. When outcomes are carefully identified and calibrated, employees can pinpoint the activities they love and be helped to find their own path toward those outcomes. The explosive growth of coaching-as-a-service companies such as BetterUp is but one sign that companies are moving away from standardization and toward offering individual guidance to employees at all levels.

These organizations also avoid feedback tools, which by definition measure each person against a standardized list of skills or competencies. I've previously explained in this magazine why feedback is pernicious ("The Feedback Fallacy," March–April 2019). In short: People's feedback is inevitably colored by their own loves (and loathings) and offers precious little to help other employees discover and contribute theirs. Aside from input about facts or required steps, feedback generally consists of one person—however well-intentioned—smothering another.

Organizing around love of the work means that no career paths are defined by the skills or competencies required at each level—indeed, no research that I know of in any refereed journal proves that the best practitioners in a given role all have the same skills and competencies. Competency models are an abstraction that denies the real-world truth that people in the same role find love in very different activities and aspects of it—and, therefore, they thrive and excel in the role using quite different methods. Careers

will increasingly be designed according to an employee's own interests and skills. AI-based software offerings such as Gloat, Fuel50, and Flux are the leaders in a growing pack of platforms that build career paths in this way.

Focus on teams. To avoid standardization, companies must organize around teams.

In 2019, as my ADPRI colleagues and I were analyzing the data from our global study of the world's workers, we discovered just how important teams are to employees. Workers who reported that they felt part of a team were not only 2.7 times as likely as others to be fully engaged, but also three times as likely to be highly resilient and twice as likely to report a strong sense of belonging to their organization.

That's because teams make a home for idiosyncrasy. In a team, each person's unique loves and loathings can be combined with those of others to create something greater than any one person could achieve alone. Humans have long known this. In fact, the oldest human art ever discovered is a 45,000-year-old painting on a cave wall on the island of Sulawesi that depicts a small group of hunters, each drawn with a different animal characteristic thought to denote the particular contribution of each team member: the trunk of an elephant to show the strength of one, the tail of a crocodile to symbolize the cunning of another. "There is no 'I' in 'team'" misses the fundamental point of a team, which is precisely to capitalize on the contribution of each unique 'I.' If

you're on a team and your manager and teammates see and know your loves, they can find ways to help you do work that you love better than a blind organization ever could.

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But today most organizations are *not* built around teams. Although plenty of teamwork is happening, leaders can't see it or take advantage of it. Just look at most existing human-capital-management software. It displays individuals and who they report to, but not which teams they're on.

An organization with a focus on teams institutes formal team-joining programs in which people learn why they were picked for their assignments. This introduction includes detailed descriptions of the skills and talents they bring to their teams and what they can rely on or turn to each teammate for. Patagonia takes its team building out of headquarters with hiking trips to the nearby Santa Ynez mountains or campfires on the beach in Ventura to help team members see one another as whole, unique people. There they might learn that one member loves working under pressure, another is most creative from 6 AM to noon, and another must do a three-mile run around the neighborhood every morning or lose motivation. As more and more people work

remotely, companies will have to be even more intentional about making joining a team a critical part of onboarding. I expect that we'll see lots of software applications emerging to fill this space.

But the most important part of being on a team is developing trust with the individuals who constitute it.

In Trust We Grow

The data supports a strong link between trust and all the good outcomes that love at work produces. When ADPRI asked its 50,000 global survey participants if they trusted their teammates, their team leader, and their senior leaders, those who strongly agreed that they trusted people in two of the three categories were three times as likely as others to be fully engaged and highly resilient. Those who strongly agreed that they trusted all three were 15 times as likely to be fully engaged and 42 times as likely to be highly resilient.

That's because trust drives the ability of employees to discover and do what they love. In a study of housekeepers at Disney World, I found that many loved their job specifically because they could be creative about how to do it. One rearranged children's stuffed animals into different scenes each day, for example. Another lay down on the bed to check the room from that angle because she knew that would be the first thing a guest did after a long day in the park. The trust given the housekeepers to exercise their autonomy—despite official rules to the contrary—was what made them love their jobs, and that love allowed them to excel in ways that no checklist of tasks could possibly do.

To deliberately engender trust in your organization, you'll need to end certain rituals and start others.

Discard rituals that erode trust. Goals cascaded down from above, performance ratings, and 360-degree surveys—mechanisms that we tend to think of as increasing alignment and boosting performance—too often signal that the organization doesn't trust its people. Goals imposed from above are artificial and disconnect employees from thinking through what they love and how they can contribute it. In contrast, a Love + Work organization trusts people to set their own goals, which are discussed and adjusted as necessary during the course of the year.



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I've previously written in these pages ("Reinventing Performance Management," April 2015) about why performance ratings are unreliable. No one trusts them—even the people getting the highest ratings. With everyone reduced to a number, the organization can't see the whole person. Similarly, everyone suspects, rightly, that 360-degree surveys generate unreliable data that in no way reveals who a particular employee is. These

mechanisms convey to employees that they are monitored but without any real trust that they know what it takes to do their jobs.

Instead, pay attention. Love + Work organizations build trust by actually paying attention to employees through their team leaders. This requires empowering those leaders and reducing their span of responsibility so that frequent, individualized attention is possible.

Organizations that build trust view a once-a-week check-in between employees and team leaders as the core human ritual at work. During this chat the team leader will not be checking up on or appraising the person or giving feedback. Instead the leader will be talking about the short-term past and future, asking, “What did you love about last week?” “What did you loathe?” “What are your priorities this coming week?” “How can I best help?”

Asking those four questions every week for an entire year will ensure that employees build trust with their team leaders. It doesn't appear to matter whether the check-in happens in person, on the phone, by email, or in an app. What matters is simply that it happens. During a check-in both people can talk about the specifics of the work the employee is doing, the challenges that might be arising, and what the team leader can do to help. Each sharing of a challenge and each small action to provide support help build trust between them. But not only that: Naming the

specific activities they loved the previous week keeps employees' loves front and center, tied tightly to the real work that needs to get done.



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Many organizations have already instituted the check-in as a core ritual. Cisco alone averages more than 3 million check-ins a year. It is not a cure-all, of course: Some team leaders merely go through the motions, and some employees take a long time to feel that the organization genuinely cares about who they are and what they love. But the data from millions of check-ins is compelling. Team leaders who check in every week drive their team members' engagement scores up by 77% and their team members' voluntary turnover in the following six months down by 67%.

To make this ritual possible, Love + Work organizations eschew departments or functions so large that the span of control makes it impossible for a team leader to check in with each team member. A ratio of one leader to 70 members might make financial sense on a balance sheet, but it makes little sense for people trying to build trust.

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Our leaders publicly announce that they want us to return to work, but for many of us, the current tensions regarding work all stem from our questioning whether we even want to go back to an earlier way of doing things. “Normal” led us into a workplace ecosystem that seemed designed to exploit us and stress us and reduce our agency. Normal made us unhealthy. If organizations dismiss employees’ reticence or just hope that it will pass by, they will forever struggle to attract the best people and wonder why they have such trouble keeping the ones they do attract.

In contrast, the smartest organizations will recognize that if they can redesign work with love at its core, they will be able to make new and more-genuine commitments to their workers and over time will become magnets for talent. They will truly deserve the best people.



Editor’s note: Marcus Buckingham is the author of Love + Work: How to Find What You Love, Love What You Do, and Do It for the Rest of Your Life (Harvard Business Review Press, 2022), from which this article is drawn.

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Marcus Buckingham is the head of people and performance research at the ADP Research Institute and a coauthor of *Nine Lies About Work: A Freethinking Leader’s Guide to the Real World* (Harvard Business Review Press).

