



## X-Factor Leadership

Powerful conversations with heads of talent and learning at leading corporations



Michael Fenlon

# With So Much Disruption, We All Need To Have Lifelong Learning Agendas



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*Michael Fenlon, chief future of work officer at PwC, shared smart insights with me and my colleague Adam Bryant, managing director at The ExCo Group.*

**Reimer: The future of work is a growing focus for a lot of organizations. What's driving that?**

Fenlon: Disruption is the main reason. The skills that are in greater demand across industries are responsible AI, machine learning, cloud, social media, data science and product management. Those are skills that not that long ago would have been largely associated with the tech industry, but today they are in demand across every industry, and

they're not functionally siloed either. Additionally, consider the emerging skills required to support the vast transition to sustainable sources of energy.

This has enormous implications for leaders and employees—at the level of enterprise strategy and, also, personally. How do I secure my future? How do I help our people secure their future in the workforce, and do it in a way that maintains their personal relevance and the relevance of our firm in serving our clients?

**Bryant: What's your take on the Great Resignation and #quietquitting?**

Fenlon: One of the traps that people can fall into is framing the conversation in terms of a seesaw of who has more power at any given time. Is it labor or management? If the perception is that labor has more power, then companies start doing whatever it takes to make employees happy, which can lead to investments that may stop the bleeding but are not sustainable longer-term.

On the other hand, if management has the power—and that is the basis for decision-making and strategy—then employees can be seen as just an expendable resource. The laws of supply and demand will obviously always be relevant. We have to understand them.

But how do you get off that seesaw or at least minimize it? Because it's a very reductionist way of thinking about culture and the relationships we have with colleagues, and it's not a winning mindset or formula for sustained success. A better question is, how do I create trust-based relationships, a culture of belonging and inclusion and an environment where people can be at their best, contribute to their fullest and feel empowered, where we can deliver sustainable outcomes and succeed together?

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That means two things. One megatrend that we believe will be a hallmark of workplaces going forward is personalization. We've all become accustomed as

consumers to personalized choice, and so it's natural for people to want to personalize their learning, their growth, and their career—enabled through technology. That's not transactional. That's not the Frederick Taylor factory mindset of employees "as commodities and machines." You're a valued individual and colleague and we want this experience to be relevant for you, so you can also contribute to the fullest.

But personalization must be wed with something that binds us together—a common bond, a common culture and a sense of team. Because life requires us to sacrifice for others sometimes, to act in the general interest of my team, my community, my company. So, it's both. That can be challenging to achieve, but it is extremely important to focus on purpose *and* personalization and making investments that are a win for your people as well as your business, and society.

**Reimer: What does that mean in practice for HR and talent professionals?**

Fenlon: HR technology is becoming more powerful. The imperative is not simply to have an inventory of jobs and roles, but actual skills at a granular level, and every individual must understand their personal inventory of skills and where they stand relative to the market demand, and emerging trends. How do I keep my skills relevant?

And then you fully integrate personalized learning pathways for employees. This is not the classic model of going to university for four years, and then you're done with education, and you start your career. We are experiencing a tremendous disruption of skills, so you've got to be continuously learning and upskilling. You've got to be ready to retool yourself and reposition yourself. We all have to have lifelong learning agendas.

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So, you build a talent marketplace to provide a transparent view of the opportunities that exist in the firm. Technology enables matching opportunities with people who possess

the right skills and attributes and want to develop skills. Investments in this kind of platform go precisely to my point of a win-win for the individual and firm. How do I secure the future by developing that next-generation set of skills?

Now, personalization doesn't mean that people are only going to do what they want to do without regard to the needs of the team. We have clients. We have a variety of needs. So, there are times when we all pitch in. It's about setting the right expectations to personalize the experience for employees, but also being transparent about the fact that we all have responsibilities as a member of a community.

**Bryant: What about the role of AI in HR? Can you share an example?**

Fenlon: It's clear that AI will become only more powerful as a productivity tool for all of us in many ways—and generative AI has the potential for AI to serve as a powerful “co-worker” that will be integrated into knowledge work. We've invested in building this digital system called Astro, and I'll share a quick example of how it ties to culture. We have generous vacation policies. We tell people, “We want you to take your vacation. It's a benefit you earned. It's important to your well-being.”

But our people were telling us, “I take vacation, but the work assignments keep coming, along with invites to join conference calls, even when it's not clear why I should be on those calls.” So, it's not protected time. But with Astro, you type in your vacation dates, and it automatically notifies your colleagues that you're on vacation and asks them to respect that time.

Then, when you get back from vacation, Astro will ask you whether your time was respected. And, if not, why? Then that data is integrated into a dashboard for the team leader to see patterns, insights and help drive the right behaviors. That can help reduce burnout and turnover. That helps people as individuals, but it's an example of how we can use data and responsible AI to drive personalization and culture—with applications across the whole employee experience, including personalized learning, project assignments and

developing as inclusive leaders.

**Reimer: You're being asked to think about the future at a time when it is increasingly unclear. What appealed to you about this role?**

Fenlon: We are told about the importance of living in the present. I tell people, "No, that's a terrible mistake. Live in the future." What do I mean by that? Obviously, none of us have a crystal ball. But how do we bring about today the futures we want as individuals, as a society and in our business?

And that means you have to understand present-day trends. It's like that saying from the writer William Gibson: "The future is already here. It's just not evenly distributed." So, it's such a thrilling opportunity to extract insights from the past and the present to better understand different possible scenarios for the future.

How can we be best equipped to be successful? How do we pull the future forward? I have a passion for learning, and trying to anticipate where the puck is going next is an endlessly meaningful and energizing opportunity.

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