



Unlocking the workforce ecosystem

Removing traditional employment distinctions unlocks access to a true workforce ecosystem—and with it, critical skills and worker potential

Coauthored by Karen Weisz.

Organizations increasingly rely on nontraditional workers for skills and activities that are high value and strategically important. Yet, their workforce strategies and practices are still designed for traditional workers. To unlock the full benefits of the entire workforce—which include improved business agility and scalability, expanded access to talent, and improved worker productivity and performance—you need to think of your workforce as an all-inclusive, boundaryless ecosystem, where different types of workers have different needs and make valuable contributions in different ways. This requires workforce strategies, processes, systems, and programs that maximize the unique contributions of different worker types while supporting them all in a more consistent way.

THE REDEFINITION OF the workforce began well before the pandemic. However, it has accelerated as the talent shortage and reliance on traditional work models have strained organizations' ability to access the critical talent they need. Workers are also demanding increased

flexibility over their lives and work, which nontraditional employment models can deliver.

Contingent workers already comprise a significant portion of the total labor pool (near 30%, according to some studies).¹ And over half of workers

surveyed (55%) say they already have, or are likely to, switch employment models throughout their careers, fluidly moving between traditional full-time jobs, internal opportunities outside of their formal jobs (perhaps via a talent marketplace), and freelancing/gig work.²

The shift is being fueled by several related trends, including:

Rise of worker agency. Workers of all kinds are gaining the power to influence/dictate how and where they work (and for whom).

Shortage of talent. Organizations are struggling to find the talent they need and are willing to take talent in whatever form they can get it.

Need for increased agility. Today's organizations need the ability to change directions quickly—and adjust their talent accordingly.

Generational preferences. Younger generations view work and careers differently and don't necessarily see themselves working full time over the long term for a single organization.

Rise of digital technology and the nontraditional workplace. Technology advances are making it possible for people to work productively from an anywhere-anytime-any-workforce model.

Shift to skills-based organizations. Forward-thinking organizations are shifting their primary focus from jobs and job titles to skills. This aligns well with an ecosystem mindset that values workers for the skills they provide, regardless of their employment status.

Although adoption has increased, organizations have yet to unlock the full value of the workforce ecosystem, which requires creating a better sense of belonging and a unified experience across that ecosystem. Currently, nontraditional workers are often treated as outsiders, typically not included in organizations' workforce planning, unable to access development opportunities, and not effectively recognized for their contributions to the business, all impacting productivity and personal engagement. A true workforce ecosystem requires organizations to shift their mindset, culture, work strategies/practices, and platforms/data access.

Finding better ways to integrate nontraditional workers into the workforce and culture will help give organizations expanded access to the crucial skills and talent necessary to thrive. It will also help unlock the full potential of that talent, while improving the organization's ability to scale up and down or shift focus more rapidly in response to changes in the marketplace. This is confirmed by data from the Deloitte 2023 Global Human Capital Trends survey, which reveals the top two drivers to optimize the workforce ecosystem are the workforce ecosystem's ability to meet the current demand they have (46%) and provide the agility they need for the future (36%).

SIGNALS: THIS TREND APPLIES TO YOU IF ...

- You are struggling to find the talent you need with the critical skills to execute your business strategies
- Your listening/sensing uncovers morale and engagement concerns on teams composed of traditional and nontraditional workers
- Access issues to data, collaboration tools, and work systems for your nontraditional workers are negatively impacting productivity

The readiness gap

According to the Deloitte 2023 Global Human Capital Trends survey, 84% of business leaders recognize the importance of inclusively leading an expanding workforce, including those inside and outside the organization. However, only 16% believe they are very ready to do so, representing the lowest readiness score (figure 1).

FIGURE 1

The readiness gap for workforce ecosystems

Inclusively leading an expanding workforce, including those inside and outside the organization, is important or very important to my organization's success

84%

My organization is very ready to inclusively lead an expanding workforce, including those inside and outside the organization

16%

Source: Deloitte 2023 Global Human Capital Trends survey.

Traditionally, organizations have tried to adapt through tweaks and workarounds to their traditional workforce models and policies. However, we're now at a point where duct tape and baling wire aren't good enough and fundamental changes are required. The top two barriers to unlocking the workforce ecosystem, according to the Deloitte 2023 Global Human Capital Trends survey, were the need to shift culture (27%) and ways of working (26%).

The new fundamentals

Adopt a workforce ecosystem mindset.

Moving forward, you need to think of your entire pool of workers (and future workers) as a boundaryless ecosystem—treating all types of

workers as highly valuable and integral to the business. This includes not only explicitly factoring nontraditional workers into your workforce strategies and plans, but also integrating all workers into your organization's culture (whether they are full-time or part-time workers; remote or in-person). Every single person who contributes work to your organization should reflect its core values and feel like part of the culture.

Interestingly, despite being overlooked at an organizational and system level, data from *MIT Sloan Management Review* and Deloitte reveals that a vast majority of global managers (93%) already consider both internal and external workers to be part of their workforce, indicating that managers may have already adopted this mindset.³

Take a skills-based approach. As noted in the “[Navigating the end of jobs](#)” chapter, a growing number of forward-thinking organizations are moving away from the centuries-old workforce model that is built on a foundation of formal, narrowly defined jobs and job titles. In its place, they are adopting a new skills-based approach centered around skills, capabilities, and interests. This shift aligns perfectly with the concept of a workforce ecosystem, focusing on the work that needs to get done—and skills required to do it—rather than worker type or job title.

Create an open workforce platform. Instead of having completely different approaches and platforms for traditional and nontraditional workers, adopt an open approach to talent that unlocks the full potential of every type of worker while providing greater consistency across your entire workforce ecosystem:

Open. Develop workforce strategies and plans that recognize and embrace the unique value and contributions of all types of workers, as well as their unique needs and preferences.

Integrated with speed. Ecosystem platforms need to be integrated with business strategies to flexibly adapt to changing work and customer needs.

This isn't to suggest all workers should be treated identically. Different types of workers have different needs, contribute value in different ways, and choose different trade-offs. For example, traditional full-time employees typically receive extras such as full benefits and greater job security in exchange for dedicated focus, availability, and loyalty to a single employer. Other worker groups get fewer perks in exchange for higher hourly rates and increased flexibility. To attract and harness crucial talent, it's important to respect those personal preferences.

Pivot from directing to orchestrating.

Preparing organizations and managers to operate in a workforce ecosystem requires new

management practices, shifting away from legacy command-and-control approaches to cross-functional alignment and integration, to effectively access, engage, manage, and develop external workers in ways that were previously reserved for traditional employees. Today, it is common for external workers to be influenced by many different groups, such as human resources, procurement, technology, and business development, which often do not communicate with each other about external worker processes and practices. Going forward, functional and business unit leaders need to work together to purposefully and systematically think about the holistic workforce ecosystem. These new relationships may require fundamental changes in management practices, technology, integration, and leadership, which all underpin an organization's ability to successfully orchestrate workforce ecosystems.⁴



Current experiments: What leading organizations are exploring

- **Faith-based health care providers** in the United States are exploring the creation of a consortium to develop and share talent that can be deployed across multiple member systems; build a more attractive, collective employer brand; and address talent challenges and shortages within health care. This also creates deployment flexibility within the consortium and expanded career opportunities and agency for workers, who have shared access to multiple organizations within the consortium.
- **Two large media companies** going through a merger are shifting the workforce ecosystem paradigm as they seek to harmonize their two businesses and workforces. While traditional workforce integration approaches would consider employees first and only, these companies intentionally began their workforce integration work by looking at external workers first and then “zooming in” to traditional employees. This shift will enable the organizations to better identify areas of focus and overlap to achieve synergy targets and align on the right growth plays for the future integrated organization.
- **Novartis** is integrating the management of its 100,000-plus internal workers and 50,000 external workers under the umbrella of the People & Organization function to offer a seamless experience and a holistic workforce strategy. Building this integrated view will enable leaders to think intentionally about the desired balance of internal and external workers, basing those decisions on the specific needs of the business and considering factors such as availability of skills, speed to access, and affordability.⁵
- **Unilever** employs more than 150,000 people worldwide, but the outer core of the consumer goods company’s workforce—people, third parties, and agencies—is estimated at 3 million. Senior leaders at Unilever are working to digitize data and insights about the external workforce as a prerequisite to upskilling external workers in addition to employees, to create a more flexible and agile workforce.⁶
- **M&T Bank** partnered with a regional coalition of nonprofits, local governments, and educational institutions to address unemployment and underemployment in Western New York (WNY) by training community members in high-need skills.⁷ The WNY Tech Skills initiative provides free courses in skills such as data analysis, UX design, and software engineering, and is designed to promote economic stability and health within the community, while building the broader ecosystem of talent in the region which all companies can access.
- **Local government and nonprofits** are responding to increasing workforce development challenges across the Greater Mesilla Valley region in New Mexico. The Las Cruces Chamber of Commerce and The Bridge of Southern New Mexico hosted a summit with leaders from government, private industry, higher education, and the community, to build a coalition for a self-sustaining local workforce ecosystem in the region. The summit centered on strategies to recruit, develop, and retain local talent, particularly in light of increasing worker agency. This coalition approach demonstrates a true ecosystem mindset, as government and private companies come together to build a collective development approach for their workforce.

The path forward

FIGURE 2

Survive. Thrive. Drive.

Survive	Thrive	Drive
<p><i>Remain viable in the marketplace</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand your holistic workforce, comprising all those that perform work for your organization, to inform your strategic workforce planning efforts • Ensure all workforce reporting capabilities also include the holistic workforce • Recognize your engagement strategies (e.g., town halls) must include the holistic workforce • Understand costs and risks associated with nontraditional workers 	<p><i>Differentiate to gain competitive advantage</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand talent strategies and practices to include your full workforce ecosystem where appropriate and aligned to employment laws • Create an integrated engagement strategy for the full workforce ecosystem • Provide appropriate access to your platforms 	<p><i>Lead the market by radically innovating and transforming</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use skills, not jobs, as the foundation for accessing critical talent • Encourage traditional employees to get outside experience and skills • Tap into the full workforce ecosystem to positively influence outcomes in areas such as sustainability, DEI, and human risk • Enhance leadership capability and mindset to successfully orchestrate the full workforce ecosystem

Source: Deloitte analysis.

Looking ahead

Instead of clinging to the traditional, narrow definition of “workforce”—which prioritizes full-time employees and treats everyone else as “other”—organizations need to adapt their mindset and practices to fit the real-world talent pool, which is far more complex and increasingly comprised of nontraditional workers with skills and experiences that are high value and strategically important.

The new workforce fundamentals—such as an ecosystem mindset and open workforce platform—aren’t just better for the current and future workers in your ecosystem; they are better for your organization too—giving you access to more and better talent; helping you get the most value from

different kinds of talent; and providing more flexibility to scale up and down or shift focus in response to the changing needs of your business and marketplace. Respondents to the Deloitte 2023 Global Human Capital Trends survey, who have made strides to optimize their approach toward workforce ecosystems, also report increased innovation, financial performance, retention, and a stronger leadership pipeline.

Chris Ernst, chief learning officer at Workday, said, “Harnessing the power of the ecosystem allows our business to get work done in a much more inclusive, agile, and flexible way. At Workday, we use Career Hub, where employees can share their current skills and interests, and receive relevant connections, gigs, curated learning content, and recommended jobs to help them on their career

journeys. We've had over 2,100 workmates (about 12% of our workforce) participate in gigs. It's really been an organic adoption and we've been able to quickly expand from small, short-term gigs to multiple month gigs that are connecting employees to opportunities to solve business challenges."

Organizations have been pursuing these objectives for decades but always had to design solutions around the boundaries of the traditional workforce model. With an ecosystem mindset and open workforce platform, those traditional boundaries are removed, enabling leaders to maximize the

contributions of every worker, regardless of their work arrangements.

Deloitte's 2023 Global Human Capital Trends survey polled 10,000 business and HR leaders across every industry, with 105 countries participating. The survey data is complemented by interviews with executives from some of today's leading organizations. These insights gathered shaped the trends in this report.

Endnotes

1. MBO Partners, *The contingent labor imperative: How agile enterprises succeed in a modern workforce model*, August 2022.
2. Sue Cantrell, Michael Griffiths, Robin Jones, and Julie Hiipakka, *The skills-based organization: A new operating model for work and the workforce*, Deloitte Insights, September 8, 2022.
3. Elizabeth J. Altman, David Kiron, Robin Jones, and Jeff Schwartz, "Orchestrating workforce ecosystems: Strategically managing work across and beyond organizational boundaries," *MIT Sloan Management Review*, May 17, 2022.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Greg Pokriki, "Buffalo's Tech Academy and how it benefits other companies," *Invest: BuffaloNiagra*, November 17, 2021; M&T Bank, "Regional coalition announces 'WNY Tech Skills Initiative' to accelerate economic recovery, provide community with access to technology training," press release, December 16, 2020.

Acknowledgments

Karen Weisz coauthored our 2023 Global Human Capital Trends discussion on "Unlocking the workforce ecosystem."

The authors would like to thank **Chris Ernst** (Workday) for his contributions to this chapter.

The authors would like to thank **Sarah Hechtman** and **Abby Shuster** for their leadership in the development of this chapter, and **Balaji Bondili**, **Grace Stafford**, and **Gwen Widicus** for their outstanding contributions.

Deloitte's Human Capital professionals leverage research, analytics, and industry insights to help design and execute the HR, talent, leadership, organization, and change programs that enable business performance through people performance. Visit the Human Capital area of [Deloitte.com](https://www.deloitte.com) to learn more.

About the authors

Christina Brodzik | Principal | Deloitte Consulting LLP | cbrodzik@deloitte.com

As a principal in Deloitte Consulting LLP, Christina Brodzik brings more than 20 years of experience to the human capital space. She focuses on financial services and insurance, and specializes in a wide range of transformations including strategic change, talent strategies, learning solutions, talent acquisition, and diversity & inclusion. As the national leader of Deloitte's Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Client Service practice, she is a certified facilitator for Deloitte's Inclusive Leadership Experience and Strategy Inclusion Labs.

In addition her client responsibilities, Brodzik has served as the Financial Services Women's Initiative lead for partner/director talent planning, as well as the Human Capital Women's Initiative deputy.

Sue Cantrell | Vice President | Deloitte Consulting LLP | scantrell@deloitte.com

Susan Cantrell is vice president of Products, Workforce Strategies at Deloitte Consulting LLP. She is a leading expert and frequent speaker on future of work and human capital. She is co-author of the Harvard Business Press book *Workforce of One*, and has been published widely in publications like Harvard Business Review, Wall Street Journal, and MIT Sloan Management Review. She has more than 20 years of experience serving as an executive advisor, author, researcher, and developer of new solutions that help organizations harness digital technologies and evolve their workforces to innovate, unlock agility, and drive transformation. She holds a Master of Science degree in management information systems from Boston University, and a Bachelor of Arts degree from Vassar College.

Kraig Eaton | Principal | Deloitte Consulting LLP | keaton@deloitte.com

Kraig Eaton is a principal in Deloitte Consulting LLP's US Human Capital service area and serves as the colead of the Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends team. Eaton has more than 28 years of experience working with senior business and HR executives to transform their human capital strategies and capabilities to better support the business goals of the organization, specifically supporting some of the world's leading organizations on efforts spanning the full spectrum of HR and workforce transformations, from upfront strategy development through large-scale operating model, organization, and technology implementations.

John Forsythe | Managing director | Deloitte Consulting LLP | joforsythe@deloitte.com

John Forsythe is a managing director in the US Government & Public Services (GPS) Human Capital practice of Deloitte Consulting LLP. He specializes in helping executive clients lead behavioral change across organizational boundaries and is the senior sponsor of Deloitte's GPS Culture Transformation offering. Forsythe has more than 31 years of business experience, including 23 years in public services consulting. During his career, he has led many consulting assignments, developing expertise in culture, leadership development, strategic change, organizational assessment, communications, leadership alignment, and executive coaching. He has provided strategic advice and counsel to clients from across the government and commercial sectors, and his clients include the following public sector organizations: the US Air Force, the US Navy, the US Army, the US Marine Corps, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, US Transportation Command, Special Operations Command, the US Department of Commerce, the US Patent and Trademark Office, the US Department of Agriculture, the Environmental Protection Agency, the US Forest Service, the US Department of Veterans Affairs, and the US Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Michael Griffiths | Principal | Deloitte Consulting LLP | mgriffiths@deloitte.com

Michael Griffiths is a principal in Deloitte Consulting LLP's Workforce Transformation practice and serves as the colead of the Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends team. Griffiths leads Deloitte's Workforce Development market offerings, which drive the market in learning transformations, knowledge management, leadership development, and assisting clients to become skills-based. Griffiths is well published in the field of learning and talent and is the leading market voice on becoming a skills-based organization.

Steve Hatfield | Principal | Deloitte Consulting LLP | sthatfield@deloitte.com

Steve Hatfield is a principal with Deloitte Consulting LLP and serves as the global leader for Future of Work. He has more than 25 years of experience advising global organizations on issues of strategy, innovation, organization, people, culture, and change. Hatfield has advised business leaders on a multitude of initiatives including activating strategy, defining a preferred future, addressing workforce trends, implementing agile and resilient operating models, and transforming culture oriented to growth, innovation, and agility. Hatfield has significant experience in bringing to life the ongoing trends impacting the future of work, workforce, and workplace. He is a regular speaker and author on the future of work and is currently on the Deloitte leadership team shaping the research and marketplace dialogue on future workforce and workplace trends and issues. He has a master's degree in social change and development from Johns Hopkins and an MBA from Wharton, and is based in Boston.

Lauren Kirby | Manager | Deloitte Consulting LLP | lkirby@deloitte.com

Lauren Kirby is a manager in Deloitte Consulting LLP's Workforce Transformation practice with specific expertise in employee experience, talent, leadership, and change programs. She focuses on advising organizations as they align business and talent strategy and define the strategic initiatives that make their people a critical enabler of business and market success. In addition to authoring this report, Kirby served as the program manager for the 2023 Global Human Capital Trends team. She has an MBA from Duke's Fuqua School of Business.

David Mallon | Vice president | Deloitte Consulting LLP | dmallon@deloitte.com

David Mallon, a vice president with Deloitte Consulting LLP, is chief analyst and market leader for Deloitte's Insights2Action team. He and the Insights2Action team help clients to sense, analyze, and act—with purpose and precision—at the ever-shifting intersection of work, workforce, workplace, and industry. Part of Deloitte since 2013, Mallon is the former head of research for Bersin. He brings more than 20 years of experience in human capital and is a sought-after researcher, thought leader, and speaker on organization design, organizational culture, HR, talent, learning, and performance. Mallon is an author of Deloitte's annual *Global Human Capital Trends* study and a cohost of the *Capital H* podcast.

Shannon Poynton | Senior manager | Deloitte Consulting LLP | shpoynton@deloitte.com

Shannon Poynton is a senior manager in Deloitte Consulting LLP's Human Capital practice with more than 10 years of experience designing and executing organization, talent, leadership, and change programs that enhance business performance. Poynton advises organizational leaders on strategies to help them retain critical talent, engage their workforce, and reimagine work through innovative combinations of humans and technology. She is a frequent speaker on talent and workforce trends and has coauthored Deloitte's 2020, 2021, and 2023 *Global Human Capital Trends* reports.

Nic Scoble-Williams | Partner | Deloitte Tohmatsu Consulting LLC | nscoble-williams@tohmatsu.co.jp

Nic Scoble-Williams, a partner with Deloitte Tohmatsu Consulting LLC in Japan, is Deloitte's global leader for Work. With more than 20 years' cross-industry experience in information technology services, talent strategy and advisory, and mergers and acquisitions, Scoble-Williams works with businesses and governments to embed future of work vision into enterprise transformation strategies. She is also a practicing lawyer and passionate about multilateralism to help provide equal access to opportunities for all, and position workers to thrive in the green and digital economies, in which decent work and life-long learning are key to putting humans on the path for a sustainable, equitable, and inclusive future. Scoble-Williams is a regular speaker and author on the key shifts transforming the future of work and the new opportunities and aspirations they present for making work better for humans and humans better at work.

Joanne Stephane | Executive Director, DEI Institute | Principal, Deloitte Consulting LLP | jstephane@deloitte.com

For more than 25 years, Joanne Stephane has worked with C-suite executives to define, design, and operationalize their workforce experience vision. She helps clients transform their Talent and HR organizations, strategy through implementation and beyond, to achieve sustainable results. Stephane is eminent on the evolving role of HR, and of the CHRO, in shaping the way enterprises compete, access talent, and curate experiences, and show up in the communities where they operate. She brings this perspective in examining how organizations can and should drive towards racial equity. In addition to serving clients, Stephane also leads Deloitte's US HR Strategy & Solutions Talent Group in the HR Transformation service offering, is the Chief DEI Officer of Deloitte's US Human Capital practice, and is the Executive Director of Deloitte's DEI Institute. Joanne primarily focuses in the Consumer Products, Health care, and Life Sciences sectors.

Yves Van Durme | Partner | Deloitte Consulting | yvandurme@deloitte.com

Yves Van Durme is the global organization transformation leader for Deloitte and is a partner in the North & South Europe Consulting practice of Deloitte. Van Durme has been leading the Strategic Change team on a journey to change “Change.” He specializes in cultural transformation, leadership and organization development, and data-driven people strategy, and has more than 24 years’ experience as a consultant, project manager, and program developer for human capital projects for multiple European, Japanese, American, and Belgian multinationals. Based on his experience coaching high-performance sports, he has an affinity for leadership and organization development. Previously, Van Durme was the business unit director “talent management” for Hudson BNL, where he was involved from a content and management perspective with HR strategy, competency, and performance management, career counseling, assessments, management development, organization, and change.

Deloitte. Insights

Sign up for Deloitte Insights updates at www.deloitte.com/insights.



Follow @DeloitteInsight

Deloitte Insights contributors

Editorial: Junko Kaji, Rithu Mariam Thomas, Rebecca Knutsen, Hannah Bachman, Blythe Hurley, Emma Downey, Aditi Gupta, and Arpan Kumar Saha

Creative: Matt Lennert, Natalie Pfaff, Govindh Raj, Meena Sonar, and Hazel Raj

Audience development: Nikita Garia

Cover artwork: Eva Vázquez

About Deloitte

Deloitte refers to one or more of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited (“DTTL”), its global network of member firms, and their related entities (collectively, the “Deloitte organization”). DTTL (also referred to as “Deloitte Global”) and each of its member firms and related entities are legally separate and independent entities, which cannot obligate or bind each other in respect of third parties. DTTL and each DTTL member firm and related entity is liable only for its own acts and omissions, and not those of each other. DTTL does not provide services to clients. Please see www.deloitte.com/about to learn more.

About this publication

This communication contains general information only, and none of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited (“DTTL”), its global network of member firms or their related entities (collectively, the “Deloitte organization”) is, by means of this communication, rendering professional advice or services. Before making any decision or taking any action that may affect your finances or your business, you should consult a qualified professional adviser. No representations, warranties or undertakings (express or implied) are given as to the accuracy or completeness of the information in this communication, and none of DTTL, its member firms, related entities, employees or agents shall be liable or responsible for any loss or damage whatsoever arising directly or indirectly in connection with any person relying on this communication. DTTL and each of its member firms, and their related entities, are legally separate and independent entities.

© 2023. For information, contact Deloitte Global.