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### Re-thinking the Employer/Employee Contract Post Covid-19

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#### Recommended Citation

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Buffalo State  
State University of New York  
Department of Creative Studies

Re-thinking the Employer/Employee Contract  
Post Covid-19

by

Mary. R. Brown

An Abstract of a Project in  
Creative Studies

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Master of Science

May 2020

Buffalo State  
State University of New York  
Department of Creative Studies

## ABSTRACT OF PROJECT

### Re-thinking the Employer/Employee Contract Post Covid-19

The overall aim of this paper is to examine the employee/employer contractual relationship, through the perspective of the current global pandemic (Covid-19). The principle tools used are: reflections on my personal work experiences over the last 15 years, including Covid-19 work-related events; analysis of responses to a tailored questionnaire targeted on a sample group of the UK working population based on my extended network; supported by literature reviews and current media reports.

The paper aggregates the learnings from the data capture to examine employee engagement levels across the three key phases of the pandemic i.e. Pre-Covid, Lockdown (During) and Post-Covid. The study examines the influence of each phase on the group's work life perceptions to determine how effectively this microcosm of the UK working population mirrors wider trends in employee disengagement identified by a number of authors in the literature and medias reports.

The insights that have emerged are used to propose the development of a conceptual product to address the identified imbalance in the current employee/employer relationship in readiness of the shift to the Conceptual Age.

*Keywords:* employee engagement, employee/employer relationship, career passport

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Dates of Approval:

May 19, 2020 -----  -----  
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## Acknowledgements

A big thank you to all of those who have supported and encouraged me throughout my journey, I have been truly blessed in so many ways. I am especially grateful to the members of the European Cohort (The Transformers), Dr. Susan Keller-Mathers and Dr. Gerard Puccio as their genuine concern and encouragement for me [and all of their students] has been a beacon of light especially during these unprecedented times in our history.

Finally, I thank my Mother who has shown me time and time again that giving up; no matter what the circumstance is never an option. So, to my dear Mother, Family and Friends I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your love, prayers and patience for without you this project would not have been started or completed! Your encouragement and support have never wavered and for that I will be eternally grateful.

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## SECTION ONE: BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

### Purpose and Description of the Project

*“Coronavirus crisis will change how we work forever...*

*We will emerge from isolation ready to work in a way*

*that is more empathetic to how people live now.”*

- AMV's CEO, Campaign Magazine

Pre Covid-19, multiple trends were accelerating in the workplace within industrialised economies indicating the need to reframe the employee/employer working relationship. My own workplace experiences, crystallised below has led me to focus on this area of interest. As a change practitioner, I am often commissioned to work on a global digital transformation projects; the strategic rationales are the same - to streamline the business processes, people and technology across borders to bring about organisational agility and transparency.

Joining programmes mid-stream, can provide 'fresh' and 'untainted' insights - often projects are clearly careering off course, but leadership are overly invested, too committed, fearful of losing face, even in the light of escalating programme costs into the \$millions. Why is it in so many workplaces that senior management team too afraid to put their heads above the parapet and call a halt to fully assess the situation? And why is it that employees in turn fear speaking out, instead they disengage, roll their eyes and shake their heads in dismay when the 'afflicted' programme is mentioned. These themes seem as alive in workplaces of large global organisations as in mid-size players. Another key feature is the interplay of corporate culture and poorly designed project teams means the implementation of the desired changes are at risk, as insufficient time had been spent during the critical analysis stages. Sheer chaos, but the not the

chaos that breeds novelty but the type of chaos that attracts a negative press and brings a company to its knees.

This concept project will look specifically at the trends relating to employee engagement.

Amabile (2011) refers to our current state as a “Disengagement Crisis” and goes on to say that ‘the evidence suggests that this is a global issue’ - as it has been going on for decades affecting every industry as job satisfaction is at an all-time low across the spectrum of workers, regardless of age and income bracket.

Dignan (2019), states that the ‘best practices’ of the past no longer work because the bureaucracies within existing organisations have been replaced by new technologies. Therefore, the answers that we seek can only be obtained by “living in the now” and challenging the antiquated organisational models and structures.

Pink (2006), moves beyond the current disengagement theories and literature and states “for the past few hundred years thinking associated with the left brain has dominated” as we progressed through the previous industrial revolutions. However, the 4<sup>th</sup> Revolution (the Digital Age) and the advancement of artificial intelligence (AI), has automated many of the tasks that had previously occupied workers so now “the future favours right brain thinkers”. In other words, logical, rational left-brain thinking is necessary yet no longer enough. The right brain skills of design, storytelling, emotional empathy, the big picture, playfulness and creating meaning is now what the current workforce will seek and Pink (2006) refers to this era as the ‘Conceptual Age’ – an era in which Covid-19 has catapulted us, as we are forced to contemplate of our futures – and disengagement in the workplace i.e. the mismatch of employee/employer expectations, values, reward systems and meaningless growth and development opportunities - as we navigate uncharted territories.

Post Covid-19, there will be an even greater need to rebalance the employee/employer relationship, building it on trust and transparency as this will assist in the rapid rebuild of the 'new world order'. I am among many who believe that a key component of the 'new order' is the introduction of career passport' i.e. a dynamic ever-changing record of a persons interests, skills and passions in other words the areas that have been developed and are those they wish to develop. This train of thought is supported by the findings Taylor (2017) in his review stating that everyone should feel '*they have realistically attainable ways to strengthen their future work prospects and that they can, from the beginning to the end of their working life, record and enhance the capabilities developed in formal and informal learning and in on the job and off the job activities*'. As around 20% of the global population is in lockdown because of the coronavirus, the current period is unprecedented and our existing models for forecasting cannot be relied upon, so very little can be predicated about the future. Despite this, what is clear, is nothing will be the same as businesses and individuals begin taking stock of the magnitude of what is happening and see this as opportunity to make changes.

## Section Two: Pertinent Literature

The crisis through which we are living is a turning point in our global history with words such as ‘unprecedented’, ‘lockdown’, ‘uncertain’, ‘bizarre’, ‘social distancing’, ‘vaccines’ furloughed etc. constantly being uttered or headlined hour by hour, day by day. Despite all the uncertainty, what we can be sure of is ‘this time will come to pass’. With this belief in mind, the articles, books, journals, videos and websites were purposely selected to aid the formation of a tool to rebalance the employee/employer relationship. This tool will be referred to as a ‘Career passport’. This had been done through the evaluation of the three topics below;

- Employee/Employer Relationship (reasons for disengagement)
- Organisation Design (restructuring business models, practices and frameworks)
- Living in the Conceptual/New World Order Age (Post Covid-19)

### **1. Employee/Employer Relationship (Employee Disengagement)**

The most difficult challenge that we are facing in the workplace today, is employee disengagement. The latest ‘estimates and surveys indicate that 70% of employees are either passively or actively disengaged’ (Rastogi et al, 2018) and this is ‘costing companies in the United States US\$450 to US\$550 billion a year in poor performance’ (Rastogi et al, 2018). So, what is employee disengagement? Put simply, it is when an employee for whatever reason emotionally disconnects from their work and daily tasks. It does not mean that they are physically absent it simply means that in terms of their focus and quality of work they are doing very little to aid the progression of the company.

Amabile (2011) refers to our current state as a “Disengagement Crisis” and goes on to say that ‘the evidence suggests that this is a global issue’ - as it has been going on for decades (figure 1), and is affecting every industry as job satisfaction is at an all-time low across the spectrum of workers i.e in all ages and income brackets.

The research shows, that levels of disengagement have been consistently high for decades. Dignan (2019), states that the ‘best practices’ of the past no longer work because the bureaucracies within existing organisations have been replaced by new technologies. Therefore, the answers that we seek can only be obtained by “living in the now” and challenging the antiquated organisational models and structures.

## **2. Organisation Design (Rethinking Working Frameworks/Practices)**

“The business environment is rapidly changing, forcing organisations to seek original ways to maintain their competitive advantage”. Navarrese et al, (2014) at the time of writing were unaware how critical this statement would be in 2020, in the midst of a pandemic and economic crisis.

As we are catapulted into a new era, Dignan (2019) offers a fresh perspective by recommending the dismantlement of an organisation's culture to focus on core areas for rebuilding citing that “evolutionary organisations are converging on twelve domains” (Dignan 2019, p.54). These domains are referred to as “the *Operating System*” and are regarded as “the battle grounds for the future of work” (Dignan 2019, p.54). In short, these are the areas in which big changes are currently happening and organisations will either survive or disappear from the market because of how they choose to operate in these each of these domains. As, it is within these domains that the concept of creativity and innovation is introduced, which have been identified in top 10 of skills required for the future by the World Economic Forum, (figure 1).

**Table 4: Comparing skills demand, 2018 vs. 2022, top ten**

Today, 2018	Trending, 2022	Declining, 2022
Analytical thinking and innovation	Analytical thinking and innovation	Manual dexterity, endurance and precision
Complex problem-solving	Active learning and learning strategies	Memory, verbal, auditory and spatial abilities
Critical thinking and analysis	Creativity, originality and initiative	Management of financial, material resources
Active learning and learning strategies	Technology design and programming	Technology installation and maintenance
Creativity, originality and initiative	Critical thinking and analysis	Reading, writing, math and active listening
Attention to detail, trustworthiness	Complex problem-solving	Management of personnel
Emotional intelligence	Leadership and social influence	Quality control and safety awareness
Reasoning, problem-solving and ideation	Emotional intelligence	Coordination and time management
Leadership and social influence	Reasoning, problem-solving and ideation	Visual, auditory and speech abilities
Coordination and time management	Systems analysis and evaluation	Technology use, monitoring and control

Source: Future of Jobs Survey 2018, World Economic Forum.

Figure 1 – Source: World Economic Forum – The Future of Jobs Survey 2018

According to Dignan, (2019) the foundational values (many of which stem from the Classic Management era i.e. Frederic Taylor) which many organisations today still uphold are no longer fit for purpose. He is able to come to this conclusion and demonstrate this by showing an organisational chart and asking the question “...what year is this from”? (Dignan 2019, p.7). Typically, the responses range dramatically from anywhere in the last 40 years to the present day. However, what is interesting is that the organisational chart was created over 100 years old, so despite the great technological changes that have taken place since, here we are able to see that the core structure of so many organisations has not evolved in essence “everything has changed except management” (Dignan 2019, p.7).

This begs the question, are current organisational structures (which is part of the cultural mould of an organisation) a barrier to creativity in the workplace? This is plausible along with other research carried out by Dignan, 2019 that argues not only should the core “operating system” redesigned for today’s organisations but some of the core values and underlying assumptions, which have also been shown in part to have originated from the Central

Intelligence Agency's (CIA) manifest on how to sabotage an organisation. Aspects of the tactical document created during World War II to cause disruption has unfortunately become embedded/are commonplace within so many of organisations today.

### **3. Living in the Conceptual Age (Post Covid-19)**

Glenn, (2050) and the Millennium Project team had projected the need for 'long-term and large-scale' strategies. 'to address the potential scope and spectrum of unemployment and income gaps'. However, this has been accelerated by the pandemic making it even more critical. The development of the 'career passport' is an example of a strategy which can address the employer/employee imbalance and re-engage employees to be at their creative best.



### Section Three: Progress Plan

The plan and activities below have been changed as a result of the personal and global challenges presented by the Coronavirus pandemic.

<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Task/Activity</b>	<b>Status</b> (% Started, In progress, Completed)	
<b>Jan (24<sup>th</sup>)2020</b>	Concept paper submitted for approved	-	-
<b>Apr 2020</b>	Sections 1-2-3 redrafted	100%	Completed
<b>Mar/Apr 2020</b>	Literature for revised reading list obtained and completed	100%	Completed
<b>Mar/Apr 2020</b>	Informal interviews/research (to inform thinking during/post Covid-19)	100%	Completed
<b>Apr (17<sup>th</sup>) 2020</b>	Concept paper changed and re-submitted for approval	100%	Completed
<b>Apr 2020</b>	Revised Concept Paper Approved		
<b>Apr (12<sup>th</sup>) 2020</b>	Development of a 3-part questionnaire (to further inform):		
	- Post Covid-19 work related questions compiled	100%	Completed
	- Covid-19 (Lockdown) work related questions compiled	100%	Completed
	- Post Covid-19 work related questions compiled	100%	Completed
<b>April (17<sup>th</sup>) 2020</b>	10 Question survey circulated (with deadline for responses ie 21 <sup>st</sup> Apr)	100%	Completed
<b>April 17<sup>th</sup> 2020</b>	Sections 4-6 drafted to incorporate the results of the informed thinking, informal interview/survey results  Description of the results (outcomes): - The imbalanced employee/employer relationship	100%	Completed

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Building resilience during turbulent times?</li> <li>- Possible Strategy/solutions (Career Passport)</li> <li>- Incorporating the Informal interview results (on-going discussions with peer group/ ex colleagues)</li> <li>- Incorporating Survey results/findings</li> </ul>		
<b>April 25th 2020</b>	Final project write-up	100%	Completed
<b>April 27th 2020</b>	Project Approval – Digital Commons Upload	100%	Completed
<b>May 2nd 2020</b>	Presentation	100%	Completed
<b>May 11th 2020</b>	Evaluations	100%	Completed

Table 1: High-Level Project Plan

### Section Four: Outcomes

What do you need from your workplace? What do you need to thrive and do your best work? What do you need to stay engaged? Using the ‘Gallup Employee Engagement Survey’ (table 2) and an adaptation of ‘Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, sourced from Ovation Incentives.com, to illustrate Maslow’s theory in the context of leadership and employee engagement. These tools were used as a guide, to frame the survey questions and to obtain insights beyond my own.

<b>Basic</b>	<b>This section...Addresses fundamental needs at work</b>		<b>Designed to...</b>
	Q1	I know what is expected of me at work	Address expectations
	Q2	I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right	Ensure employees have the right tools
<b>Support</b>	<b>This section...Measures individual contributions and Management Support</b>		
	Q3	I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day	Focus on strengths at work
	Q4	In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work	Emphasise recognition for good work
	Q5	My supervisor or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person	Draw attention to unique individual needs
	Q6	There is someone at work who encourages my development	Encourage individual betterment
<b>Teamwork</b>	<b>The section...Address teamwork and belonging</b>		
	Q7	At work, my opinions seem to count	Focus on input
	Q8	The mission or purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important	Emphasis purpose
	Q9	My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work	Respect for quality
	Q10	I have a best friend at work	Is about close trusting relationships
<b>Growth</b>	<b>This section...Includes elements about growth and innovation</b>		
	Q11.	In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress	Achievement and guidance
	Q12	This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow	Emphasises opportunities

Table 2 - Gallup Q12 Employee Engagement Survey questions

The survey was purposely conducted during the 'lockdown' period of the global (Covid-19) pandemic, as the unprecedented event is providing a unique opportunity into employee engagement and work/life balance.

A questionnaire was developed, using a random sampling group which represented different levels and areas within an organisation. A total of 35 questionnaires were distributed and of the anonymous responses received the following themes were captured in relation to employee engagement and work/life perceptions for the pre, during and post period of the pandemic:

- **Work life Balance:** 'Lockdown' is providing individuals with greater freedom over their work. Resulting in, having/experiencing new and innovative pastimes as virtual communities grow during the pandemic enabling individuals to get to know one another better than they ever have before. This is cultivating a desire to address the work/life balance and incorporate/pursue more leisure/creative activities.
- **Employee Disengagement:** Some of the reasons cited here were working excessively long days, not always being rewarded or recognised. An ineffective personal development plan and poor management communication
- **New Economic Landscape:** A turning point in history, with the pandemic accelerating geopolitical change which is fueling the fear of the unknown as the world is rapidly being reinvented on a scale that we have never seen before with the collapse of global markets and supply chains, crashing economies, furloughed staff and massive job losses.

- **A need to build Resilience:** With the high levels uncertainty and accelerated rates of change many are experiencing the mental and psychological effects which is being compounded due to the isolation during lockdown.

**Data capture**

The key words used by the respondees to describe how they felt were recorded for the development of an emotional response curve (figure 1). In addition to their emotional responses, the graph was also used to capture their general attitudes, as the respondees were also asked to indicate at which stage of the pandemic e.g. Pre Covid-19, Lockdown/Incubation or Post Covid-19 they would associate selected words.

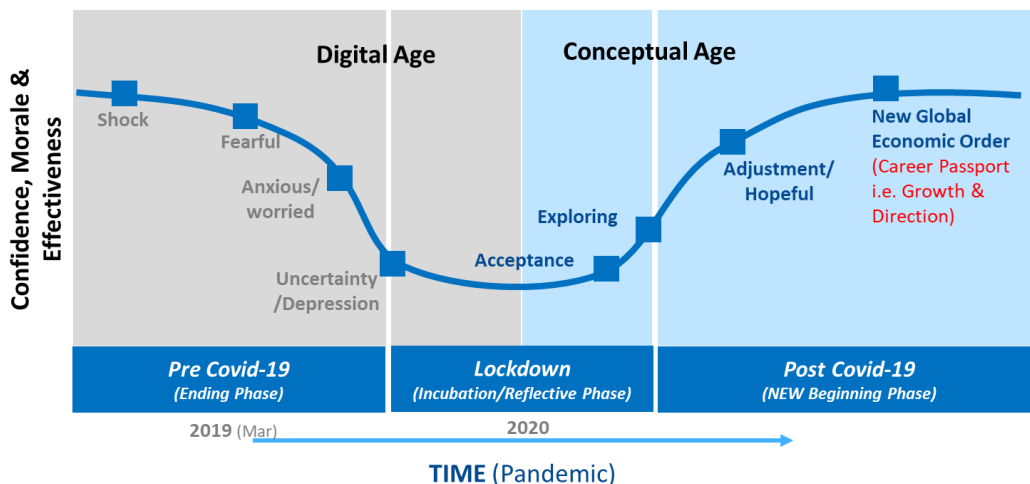


Figure 1 – Covid-19 Emotional Response Curve (Fear to Hope).

An adaptation of the change curve to illustrate the emotional state and responses of the respondees.

## Section Five: Key Learning

### 1. Ability and willingness to pivot:

In this current phase i.e. 'lockdown' through to the 'new world order' a key survival skill is turning out to be the ability to 'pivot'. In other words, the capacity to flex in response to the new reality around us – which is still evolving at a rapid pace. This is reflected on three levels; on an 'Individual level' (initially, through my own personal experiences. i.e. firstly, changing the project topic and secondly, adapting the research method to ease technology fatigue); at a 'National Level' (the questionnaire respondees and related conversations, serving as a microcosm of the national workforce); and at a 'Global Level' (changing safety measures in response to new understanding of the virus transmission).

### 2. Bridging the gap between the Digital and Conceptual Age – more work to be done

The literature and developments over the last 15 years or so have indicated a deep desire for employees to have a better work life balance. This is demonstrated in the UK with the government legislating, liberating employment practices and companies year after year competing to be ranked within the '*Sunday Times Newspaper, Best 100 Companies to Work for*'. Regardless of sector those organisations that consistently score highly are those that recognise that a great workplace is defined by its culture; a culture of trust, transparency and learning where leaders seek to mentor and promote the self-development of their employees.

However, a point worth noting here, is that the survey results in relation to 'flexible working' reveal that there are in fact two perspectives; a) the employer's, which has been the most dominant and b) the employee's, whose voice is being overshadowed. Both, are discussed in more detail here: -

- A) Employer's perspective - Companies recognise that to remain competitive in the Conceptual Age they have to attract and retain entrepreneurial talent, as this is the driver for innovation and creativity skills (figure 1). Therefore, they have refreshed their branding, values and marketing in line with this. However, they have failed to align the attitudes and working practices of middle management or re-address the disconnects between existing processes and structures. The key learning here, is that if they do not address leadership styles and restrictive business models employees will not feel empowered or sufficiently freed up to be creative.
- B) Employee's perspective - All the reasons cited in Section Four - Employee Disengagement, reflect an imbalance in the employee/employer relationship in favour of the employer. Which suggests that a true barometer of an employee's experience in the workplace is determined by their local manager versus the organisations brands, values and culture. In other words, it is how much power a manager is willing to give to an individual - which is an indicator of the level of trust. A lack of trust, is something that I have always believed to be an engagement factor and the research conducted by Rastogi et al (2018), figure 1, validates this as '*Job Control*', '*Organisational Support*' along with other factors have been cited as disengagement contributors. This sheds some light as to why disengagement levels have remained consistently high i.e. around 68% according to the '*Gallup employment engagement survey*' for decades.

So, in reality, this would suggest that organisations have embraced the aspirational theories of the Conceptual Age, however in practice, many large organisations are still deeply immersed within the methods/structures of the Industrial era.

**3. Recognising that we are more than just our job** (or the role that we perform within an organisation):

An interesting insight is that as ‘lockdown’ becomes more protracted, the discussions with the respondees became increasingly philosophical and their language more reflective, figure 2. In particular, the respondees were resonating with Aristotle’s theory of the ‘Golden Mean’ - the human pursuit of happiness is the ultimate goal – even if they were not familiar with the theory. However, with the rise of the ‘Sharing economy’ (i.e. the hiring rather than owning of goods and services) this suggests a growing awareness that material success on its own, is not synonymous with happiness.

This viewpoint has been upheld as more than 60% of the respondees when asked for a word to describe the Digital/Information age (*Pre-covid*), associated the era with; *money (bitcoin), success, gadgetry, online shopping, mobile phones etc.* However, almost all the words used to describe ‘lockdown’ and the presumed ‘new world order’, (*Post-covid*) were more aligned to the Conceptual Age e.g. *mindfulness, balance, reflection, relaxation etc.*

### **Section Six: Conclusion**

As the shock and disbelief (figure 2) of what is currently happening begins to lessen, for some there is a realisation that there is going to be a new global economic order, which will cut across all industry sectors. Some are still uncertain as to what this will bring, whilst others are



seeing this as an opportunity to reposition themselves to embrace the new work reality going forward. Regardless of where an individual lies along the curve, figure 1, this presents an opportunity to re-imagine the employee/employer contract in a way that addresses the mismatches/disconnects in the form of a life long learning career passport. This would build on the CV/resume to incorporate passions, interests and long-term goals.

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