

FUTURE OF WORK

Workers may be facing “better work-life integration”

BY JON ROHR

Last year I had the opportunity of sitting down with Simon Chan, and getting up to speed on the developing interest in what the future of work will look like. Chan, who is Vice President, Talent Academy & Future of Work at Communitech, became the cover story. The article was published in the Q4-2019 edition.

This was a new, exciting area, worthy to be further explored and documented. By the end of 2019, Chan and his team had formed a coalition – 19 organizations from across Waterloo Region. Chan calls it the “Future of Work Coalition, in Waterloo Region.” The coalition partners invest time, effort and some resources into advancing the conversation around the “future of work and learning”.

As with all new groups, they try to put definition and meaning on the bones of their vision. Meaning that will lead to action, to “try some actual, tangible pilot projects,” adds Chan. The partners include a roster of local and global talent. The University of Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University, and Conestoga College are the coalition’s academic partners. Public sector partners include the Region of Waterloo and all three cities in the Region. Institutionally, the Greater KW Chamber of Commerce, Communitech and the

Work Force Planning Council all are involved. From the private sector they’ve got a gamut of start-up companies like Plum, who are in the future of work space from the HR perspective, all the way up to Manulife, TD Bank, Morneau Shepell, and Deloitte.

The coalition was assembled in late November, 2019. Over the next three months, they started to talk seriously about some of their common priorities. They were in the process of forming working groups on three main themes – 1) changing career work expectations, 2) work integrated learning and 3) continuous or life long learning – when the coronavirus hit and plans were... “retrenched”.

Early in March 2020, Chan was in Halifax presenting to the Halifax Innovation Hub Volta. Part of the coalition’s objective is to scale up, share insights and collaborate with like-minded organizations across Canada. Following that, on March 12, they had an event in Windsor, a similar occasion, hosted

by the Work Force Planning Board of Windsor Essex, and Windsor’s Innovation Hub. “We were really getting some good momentum, in Halifax and then Windsor,” says Chan. But “once it hit,” as Chan describes, “as with many of us during COVID, lots of the organizations said ‘We just really need to retrench and focus on how do we evolve and migrate our work force into this remote work force realm’. So we did that.”

And “like everyone else, we just went on with our heads down, and then we woke up and said, “Wait a second, based on this movement to remote work, people managing their work and life and their kids, you know this whole changing expectations thing we’ve been talking about... it dawned on us, we were kinda’ joking

“Now we’re dealing with Chinese giants and this is really unknown territory with no limit.”

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around at first, that the future of work is now.” In April, “We started saying as a group, that maybe there is an opportunity here, to help elevate, in that spirit of elevating everybody’s understanding, elevate the understanding of what other organizations are doing as it relates to remote work, and what the thinking is there. And to really use this opportunity to talk about how the future of work is changing, and how its now!”

So Chan and his team did some webinars, “because that’s where everybody was pivoting to at that point of time. We can’t do in person. So let’s continue that education process around ‘What is the future of work?’ but put a COVID lens on it.” “What areas of work have been accelerated as a result of COVID?” was the main focus under the theme “The Future of Work is Now”.

Their first webinar took place April 19. “Our plan was to just do a few of them, a couple, but then our numbers started popping. We were getting 700-800 registrations per webinar.” Over the next few months, attendance expanded, and today, says Chan, “I think 5% of our attendees now are actually even outside North America.” The webinars were such a success that the organization started running them monthly, with themes around skills and learning, the change in career expectations and the sense of identity, all areas that has



Simon Chan

been impacted by COVID.

Chan likens COVID to a “life moment”, such as the passing of a loved one, paying off your mortgage, kids graduating from school. “It’s one of those moments that make you pause and think about what you really care about in life, what’s important. COVID has kind of done that for a lot of people and we’re all doing that at the same time.” Change happened, and happened quickly, as COVID became an opportunity to re-evaluate that type of thing.

“I’ve talked to people that have said ‘I didn’t realize my workplace was so traditional; it was like fighting tooth and nail just to get people to be OK with working remotely, and all of a sudden COVID hit and now people are OK with remote’.”

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Chan defines workspace as both physical and digital space. Most people are familiar with physical space – your building, an entrance, a cafeteria. Now we have to become more familiar with their digital space. “Organizations that have already been thinking about technology, digitization and the future of work, they actually made the transition fairly seamlessly, to this virtual remote environment, [and to] distributed teams. While the other organizations, who would not contemplate that, were really far behind the curve. It was a real challenge for them just to fill the gap.”

In addition to the webinars, the organization started a future of work newsletter, “where we are profiling different stories of what happening within the Coalition, what stories are happening within the Waterloo Region and then obviously beyond, specific to the future of work. We’re almost up to 1000 subscribers within just a few months.”

During this massive engagement campaign, Chan would say the number one question that they get asked, is “What is the future of work? And if I want to be future ready, as a community, organization or individual, how do I know what that means, and what do I do?” So the coalition took steps to, “spin out a research project” using their academic partners to facilitate the research. Their objective was to help define all the research and the literature. “Let’s define what the future of work means, and let’s do it at a community level,” said Chan. Initially the team came up with the idea to create a future of work readiness index for a community. “So basically,” Chan says, “a community can understand what are the domains of a community that makes it future ready and then ideally you have data that will be able to monitor progress etc..”

Starting down that path, they decided to create a self-assessment score card. The plan is that a Region or municipality, or other stakeholders within these realms, can answer some questions around three general areas: 1) how well is the community doing around continuous learning; 2) are they thinking around economic development, like diversity, inclusion, access to basic infrastructure, 3) focused on the workplace environment, what are the changing workplace dynamics, within the communities organizations, like talent attraction, adapting a flexible work arrangement, like remote working, “do they work in distributed teams?”

Later this fall the Coalition will have a white paper done by the UW and Laurier, that will outline all the elements of a future of work Community Readiness index/score card “and we’re going to use that as a basis, for Waterloo Region ... this can be one of the things we can use as an input, once a year, to complete to see how we’re progressing.”

As for economic development, that can also be used, to say that in Canada, or focused in on Waterloo Region, “we’re collaborative, we work together on problems and we get ahead of things in an innovative

nature. Look how we have taken the Future of Work theme and worked together on this. We’re progressive. The way we work isn’t adversarial. The way we work is collaborative in nature.”

COVID has certainly accelerated aspects of the future of work and slowed down other aspects. Prior to the pandemic, Chan says, “I think a lot of people felt, I get what you’re saying, but that’s 10 years out”. What COVID did to the future of work was “for various pieces of that, it just accelerated it. Remote work is one that most people point to. I do worry when people point to remote work and say that’s the future of work and that it’s synonymous, but it’s not, in reality it’s one element of it.”

Remote working, disbursed and distributed teams, “that has accelerated”. Chan reflects on those companies that didn’t have work-at-home policies, “or never even thought of it. We’re now 5-6 months in, there are a lot of organizations that will be thinking about virtual, but not everyone.” Chan sees more organizations going into a hybrid structure. “While some folks will work from home or remotely, exclusively, there might be folks that spend a bit of time remote and in the office, and there’ll be some just in the office”.

Not everything has picked up pace. Where COVID has slowed things down is with the things the coalition wanted to do collaboratively in groups, “like pilot projects. That has slowed down just a bit because people have had so many priorities, making sure that their work force is prepared and that they will make the adjustment to remote.” In the end where does this all lead? Chan believes it leads to a better “work-life integration. I am working literally where I live. People seem much more human.”

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“It’s one of those moments that make you pause and think about what you really care about in life, what’s important.”



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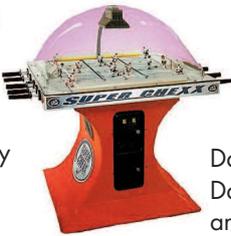
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