

# The next generation of business leaders is entering a changed world of work. Will their education prepare them?

By **Angela Yang** Globe Correspondent, Updated January 3, 2022, 6:29 p.m.



Business school graduates face a new world of work. ADOBE, GLOBE STAFF

From labor unions rising to a “Great Resignation” sweeping the corporate world, workers are reprioritizing mental health, work-life balance, and equity issues. The next generation of business leaders will enter a world where power is shifting to employees.

Now, business schools are racing to prepare their students for the changing landscape.

Susan Fournier, dean of the Questrom School of Business at Boston University, points to four tensions that define this moment: major advancements in technological innovation, a pandemic-induced overhaul of the boundary between home and work, a renewed cultural awareness of systemic social issues, and extreme political division.

“We really never had a moment with as much disruptive change as we face right [now],” Fournier said. “And so the fact that this is going to spill over into business, into academia, is just not surprising.”

For example, she said human resources had previously remained more of a “buried function,” focusing largely on retirement plans, promotion logistics, and the like. But increasingly, businesses are elevating HR’s capacity to manage the social architecture of a company. And universities need to reflect that in their curricula.

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“Probably most academic institutions, they’re lucky if they have one undergrad course in HR,” Fournier said.

Questrom HR management professor Charlie Tharp has observed a shift in how

companies define what creates value. The emphasis is not so much on buildings and machines anymore, he said, but rather on more intangible components like workers' skills and operating systems.

This is why many companies are building up their people analytics capabilities, which they hope can better predict turnover from unhealthy workplace environments that lead to burnout, he said.

“It is an emerging area that companies are now staffing up departments to do, and universities need to get ahead of that,” Tharp said. “So, as the contexts change ... the question is: How do you apply it differently in a new world, and what sort of data can inform the decision of how you do that better?”

At Brandeis University, the undergraduate business program has been overhauling its approach to teaching data analytics, according to program chairman Dan Bergstresser, who said it is increasingly important to teach not only how to organize data, but also how to communicate it well. The school rolled out a newly required course in business communication this fall.

“[Data analytics] tools are being used for a purpose and that purpose is to communicate, so these things go hand in hand in our view,” Bergstresser said.

MIT's Sloan School of Management has also been training students to meet the moment. In 2020, it kicked off a virtual speaker series titled, “Redefining Management: Leadership for Social Progress in Troubled Times,” with people analytics at the forefront of one of its panels.

In 2021, the series came back with another relevant theme: “Building a Better World of Work.”

Sloan professor Erin Kelly, who specializes in work and organization studies, said this

period of change is an opportunity for managers to reconsider how to support employees in more creative ways. Individual wellness initiatives are helpful, she said, but the problem lies in the way many people are asked to work.

“It’s an exciting moment, because we may be ready to look at how work can be more sane and sustainable across all kinds of occupations,” Kelly said.

Front-line workers in health care and food service have labored through the most hazardous and high-stress stretches of the pandemic, while many corporate workers added full-time homeschooling and day-care routines to their responsibilities. The result is a growing recognition that work conditions are critical to physical, mental, and emotional health.

Kelly, as part of a research team, released in July a [toolkit](#) to help employers create work conditions that better support employee well-being. It identifies specific changes in three categories: taming excessive work demand, allowing employees more control over their work, and improving social relationships in the workplace.

Ultimately, business schools need to evolve with the business world, and fast.

Jerry Kane, a professor at Boston College’s Carroll School of Management and co-author of “The Transformation Myth: Leading Your Organization through Uncertain Times,” said disruptions to business are sure to continue even after the pandemic ends.

So, business schools must train students to work and lead in uncertain conditions, he said. And companies must approach the future with intention, because this year’s mass labor exodus is not so much a “Great Resignation” as it is a “Great Reshuffling.”

Workers are leaving to take on the jobs that offer them a more desirable work-life balance and the option to choose where they perform best, he said. Employees value flexibility now more than ever, and returning to pre-pandemic practices may cost businesses top talent.

“The next three to five years are going to be some of the most exciting and interesting, from a business perspective, in any of our lifetimes,” Kane said. “The world has been fundamentally disrupted, and how we rebuild that is going to be super fascinating to watch.”

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