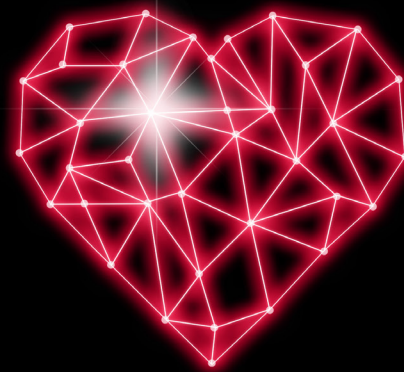


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EMPATHY

Game Changing the Asian Workplace

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Executive Summary

We are living in the age of the Anthropocene - an age where human decisions and activity have shaped our environment to the point of potentially no return.

Alarming signals of climate change, environmental and resource pressures, technological change and influence - in confluence with global political change and major socio demographic shifts - will continue to have unprecedented and uncertain ramifications on how humans will be living and working, into the next decade and beyond.

Across Asia, the 'world's most disaster-prone region' (CNN, 2019), people are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of such uncertainty, given our heterogeneous geographies and cultures, inequalities, rapidly shifting commercial landscape, and mass labour and migration patterns.

Yet we are also in a uniquely powerful place to more proactively and positively shape the change, given our size, our dynamism and advantaged growth.

This paper argues the momentum for influence and opportunity for changing the game lies as much with the private sector as it does with government. We need CEOs, leaders, businesses and other organisations to collaborate, to act as a catalyst for the transformation of our incumbent, outdated approaches toward humanity's problem solving. To universally adopt accountability for solving the challenges of people and of our planet, and to institutionalise this as a valid strategy for business wellness. To think bigger; to ground strategically in a useful purpose; to recognise the impact on all stakeholders of the multiple decisions made every day, for the long term as well as for tomorrow.

To get there, we most urgently must upgrade our understanding of the needs, tensions and values of the people, and communities

that business serves, and also those of the workforce that supports business success. We need to ultimately build new, more enlightened paths to create new value and mobilise regenerative growth, if we are to survive, never mind to truly shape the change we need. We must champion purposeful brand building which consciously considers the wide ranging impact of our decisions, inside of the organization as well as out.

As technology also continues to transform the way we work and live, we too - as practitioners, decision makers and human beings - have a clear and pressing mandate to reflect more closely on our own human values and behaviours. With sweeping shifts made even bolder by AI and automation, we now have an opportunity to nurture all of our human advantages - our reasoning, our creativity, our intuition, our wisdom and our experience - and most critically our empathy. Above all, we must proactively nurture and reframe "soft skills" as "critical skills", if we are to work productively as a complement to machines, rather than to continue to emulate them by divorcing ourselves from our uniquely human strengths.

Finally, we should dismiss employee wellbeing at our peril. The evidence is clear; businesses will no longer be able to operate without an overhaul of workplace practices; practices that have been so detrimental to the health and wellbeing of the very people business relies on to succeed. A new generation of customers is here to hold them to account.

Ultimately though, we must all be accountable if we are to survive what the future brings; if we are to lead it with purpose, pace and scale. Are we to be masters of our human destiny? Or will we look back in dismay on what we have created and realise we became architects of our own demise? Each of us gets to decide, and the time to choose is now.



I. Our Practice and Research

1.1 Scope

This paper has an Asia region emphasis. Asia is, of course, not a monolith. It is extremely diverse. What we offer however are snapshots of how this region may be impacted or behave differently from other regions in the world, in terms of the critical challenges we face as humans today and will likely do in the future, in relation to leadership and the workplace.

1.2 Practice

Our individual and collective experiences have enabled us to listen to and have a deep understanding of a wide range of the needs and challenges that different people face today, and are likely to face in the future. Our profiles are in Appendix A.

1.3 Primary research

To supplement our desk research and thinking, we conducted qualitative interviews (face to face, video-conferencing or online) with 17 respondents from diverse sectors, industries and generations allowing us valuable insights from different perspectives. All but one are based in the Asia-Pacific region. Please see Appendices B and C for respondent profiles and research areas.



2. Thinking bigger to shape a better world

2.1 Past and present human decisions are still wreaking havoc on our collective futures.

Whilst scientists continue to debate the date of the precise geological inception of the Anthropocene - the age of human impact - there is no question that decisions made in the past and present are now culminating in an existential crisis for not just humans, but for our entire humanity and the ecosystems which support us.

In 2019, CNN reported:

"Toxic smog shrouded Asian megacities, hundreds died in flooding and landslides, cyclones battered coastlines and bushfires, droughts and deadly heat waves, led to towns and cities almost running out of water".

(Regan, CNN, Dec 2019)

In Asia, people are particularly vulnerable to such seismic changes, with climate shifts increasingly exposing vulnerabilities in large urbanising populations. With the inevitable and escalating disaster risks, 119 million people are projected to be living in extreme poverty across several Asian countries by 2030 (UNESCAP, 2019). That's assuming anyone can still breathe. More than half of the 5 million deaths globally attributed to air pollution are attributed to just six countries in Asia (Health Effects Institute, SoGA, 2019).

Well into the 21st century, in 2020 it is clear we are, as a region, still woefully underprepared for inevitable change.

"Nineteen of the 25 cities most threatened by a 1m sea-level rise are in Asia" (Horton, SCMP, 2018)

"Hazards are deviating from their usual tracks and becoming more intense, creating greater complexity and deep uncertainty that are harder to predict. The region is not sufficiently prepared for this climate reality." (UNESCAP, 2019)

Our planet could not be talking more loudly and clearly. There is no overdramatizing the urgency of people with power making much better decisions on behalf of us all.

"A new global deal for nature and people is urgently needed.... Without a dramatic move beyond 'business as usual' the current severe decline of the natural systems that support modern societies will continue – with serious consequences for nature and people" (WWF, Living Planet Report, 2018)

2.2 While we advance in technology, we are downgrading our humanity.

Undoubtedly, the way technology has become so intrinsic to our daily lives has also shaped where we are as human beings today.

For some time, we may not truly understand the real ramifications of the past 20 years of lightning speed technological takeover. However, with the adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Virtual Reality (VR) into the mainstream, plus automation replacing up to half of the jobs in the next 20 years (Horobin, Bloomberg 2019), it is critically important that humans become much more accountable for the impact of the rewiring of our own ecology.

In this context, the preservation of the human spirit and upholding of our emotional health is likely to be of paramount importance over the coming years. Perhaps a period of reflection is key, as we continue to wake up to the sometimes unwitting consequences of those technological innovations that we have so blithely pressed 'play' on.

Tristan Harris, now-founder of the Center for Humane Technology, previously a product manager at Google, poignantly points out (Peters, Fast Company 2019):

"While we've been upgrading the machines, we've been downgrading our humanity"

The Times (Knowles, 2019) quotes Mr Harris also as saying that the products and services of tech giants have also: *"... amplified feelings of outrage, polarisation and vanity, caused smartphone addiction and a sense of information overload. They have contributed to a rise in mental health problems... overwhelming who we are and our identities."*

This evidence and so much more urges us to beware of the human cost, and ensure our human values are upheld as precious ore, rather than commodities to be traded off in the quest for permanent technological expansion.

One of our respondents, who is the GM of a PR company sums it up so well:

"Our ability to feel - emotionally, physically, intuitively - sets us apart from any software, hardware or code built by humans (...)we need to get back to basics and relearn some of the human 'powers' we relinquished as we increased technology's stranglehold on our lives."

Building on our 'human skills' to adapt to and succeed in the new paradigms of business and life is going to be increasingly essential concurs another of our respondents, the SVP of a Media company:

"As automation, robotics and AI advance and permeate more industries, we will value the human interaction, smiles, warmth in engagement, hospitality, cultural nuances, etc. We will tire of cookie cutter answers, miss the empathy in responses, miss the innovation, the personal touch, the madness and the unexpected surprise!"

With this in mind and more, is it time that we reboot our own human selves; redefine what human means, before technology redefines it for us?

2.3 Momentum for game changing is with the Private sector

“Trust is at a breaking point. Trust in national institutions. Trust among states. Trust in the rules-based global order.” says a report in Channel News Asia (Duncan, CNA 2018). But an interesting shift is happening, one which as practitioners and leaders, we can all support and influence to great effect over the coming years.

CEOs in the private sector are increasingly being urged to take the lead on change and to solve these bigger challenges of humankind. In a recent study conducted by Edelman in 2019, *“76% of the general population want CEOs to lead change, instead of waiting for the government to impose it.”*

CEOs are responding - at least on paper. In August of 2019, 181 CEOs of the Business Roundtable issued a statement that aimed to set out a commitment to delivering value to all their stakeholders, not just those benefiting financially from their success; that means their employees, customers, suppliers and communities (New York Times, 2019).

Here in Asia, some senior leaders are concurring. Says one of our respondents - the SVP of a Media company:

“Private sector companies...have the ability to set trends, begin movements, set a transformation into motion,... impact more companies in that sector, educate and influence opinion leaders and when scaled they can impact governments.”

Crucially, money managers are now spearheading action via fundamental changes in the way they invest. In its 2020 letter to CEOs, Blackrock commits to translating its words into action: *“we will be increasingly disposed to vote against management and board directors when companies are not making sufficient progress on sustainability-related disclosures and the business practices and plans underlying them.”* (Blackrock, 2020)

This is a sea change in language from even two to three years ago, when purpose beyond profit was summarily dismissed by many as an idealist's dream.

**OUR ABILITY TO FEEL -
EMOTIONALLY, PHYSICALLY,
INTUITIVELY - SETS US APART
FROM ANY SOFTWARE,
HARDWARE OR CODE BUILT BY
HUMANS**

GM OF A PR COMPANY

2.4 Customers' needs and values are the new drivers of business growth

Aside from the call for business-led change, we have also started to see - especially in the past couple of years - real movement from consumers, in terms of what they choose to support with their dollars. Says Tim Kelsall, Chief Client Officer for Asia at Kantar, one of the world's largest data, research and insight firms:

“Consumers hold the economic power, in terms of the choices they make and what they spend their \$ on. I think it's clear from the companies we work with and what consumers are telling us in that if these brands and business don't adapt to the challenges the world is faced with they will not support them and the consequences are clear in that these brands won't survive in the new world. As a consequence, businesses need more than ever to listen and be in touch with the consumer to adapt their business models, co create and innovate more relevant products, services and experiences fit for a new consumer era.”

Plenty of other data support this, for example:

- Nine in ten consumers of consumers in Asia Pacific want brands to get involved in the issues they care about (Kantar, Purpose in Asia 2020).
- 63% of consumers are now buying goods and services from companies that reflect personal values and beliefs (Accenture, 2016).
- Between 2013 and 2018, 50% of sales growth among consumer packaged goods came from sustainability-marketed products (Reints, Fortune 2019).

Adapting to and getting ahead of purpose-led business is now almost certainly one of the principle drivers if businesses are to survive, let alone thrive. The World Economic Forum (WEF, 2018) reports that 41% of Consumer Industry companies in the S&P 500 have either been acquired or gone out of business since 2000, and predicts that 50% of existing S&P 500 companies will face the same fate within the next ten years. Given these statistics, smart business might proactively adopt a problem-solving mindset that puts humans and the planet at the centre of strategy, to mitigate against the risk of befalling the same fate.

“If business doesn't actively start owning or addressing some of the issues that are out there in society, then society won't let them be around.”

Paul Polman, ex-CEO Unilever (Saldinger, Devex 2020)

2.5 Dismiss employee wellbeing at your peril

Crucially, business of the future will not be able to even operate without greater alignment with the values of its employees. According to Ernst & Young, employees are 3 times more likely to stay in a company with a meaningful purpose (EY, Winning with Purpose, 2016).

"Big or small, the private sector will soon have no choice but to do business for good rather than for shareholder profits alone, at the peril of finding and/ or retaining anyone in their employ" says one of our respondents, Laurent Verrier, CEO of One9ninetly.

As the imperative then builds for future-ready change, even a cursory look at the Asian workplace today highlights that we have a long way to go to be employee-worthy and workplace ready. When asked which aspects and needs of humans respondents feel are under-recognised in workplaces across Asia today, our respondents summarised a range of opinions, formed through years of working in the region.

Appreciation, empathy, willingness to help the underdog, and demonstrating genuine care for others in the organization. - Executive Coach

Spirituality, agency and power, socio-emotional selves - The Programme Manager at an Educational Institution

The chasm to heal is deep...

2.5.1. Overwork is institutionalised

Long work hours have characterised Japan's work culture for years (Green, 2017 in Asian Correspondent). There is a term: "Karoshi", which means "death by overwork" (National Defense Counsel for Victims of KAROSHI, accessed 2019).

Singapore's Straits Times (Tan, 2014) mentioned that more young professionals in Singapore are ending up with medical problems like insomnia, depression and hypertension, because of extra-long work hours.

Some of our respondents also flagged this as a priority issue in Asia.

The GM of a PR company tells us: *"The irony is that Asians typically espouse filial piety and yet, workplaces in the region are the weakest proponents of time with the family for its workers"*.

Counsellor and Psychotherapist, Shirley Woon said, referring to her experience in Singapore: *"the amount of work that is thrown to (young adults) is just enormous...they are not able to manage. So they end up working long hours and it takes a toll on them mentally"*.

2.5.2. Workplace depression is significant

In East Asia, depression in the workplace is far reaching, with "wide and devastating consequences" for thousands of organisations and costing more than US\$246 billion a year (S. Evans-Lacko & M. Knapp, 2016). Lead researcher of the relevant study, Dr. Sara Evans-Lacko said that unless governments and employers prioritise this, costs of depression are set to go up.

2.5.3. Rates of workplace bullying overwhelm in Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore

Rates were almost three times the level in the UK (AIA Vitality Healthiest Workplace research, 2017). 24 per cent of Singapore workers said they have been "bullied, undermined or harassed" in the workplace in the past year - one of the highest levels in the world, according to a recent study by Kantar (Lam, Business Times, Nov 2019).

2.5.4. Human connection eclipsed by KPIs

PhD student, Sujith Kumar Prankumar said:

"when I walk into an office, I've been in situations where everyone's just working, no-one's talking, no-one's acknowledging each other"... everything is..what's your worth? Your KPI? Or what value can you bring? Or how much investors are you attracting? Basically metrics."

IN EAST ASIA, DEPRESSION IN THE WORKPLACE IS FAR REACHING, WITH "WIDE AND DEVASTATING CONSEQUENCES" FOR THOUSANDS OF ORGANISATIONS AND COSTING MORE THAN US\$246 BILLION A YEAR
(S. EVANS-LACKO & M. KNAPP, 2016)

2.5.5. Rights are unevenly applied

Things are even worse for the more vulnerable. An expert we interviewed summarised the situation:

"some of the challenges include a lack of wider awareness or acceptance of business and human rights principles across the business community, such as in Asia....Many low-skilled and migrant workers across Asia are unaware of their own rights and/or how to exercise them... [women] are also affected disproportionately by corporate human rights harms..." Guna Subramaniam from the Institute for Human Rights and Business

Even within this small snapshot today, it looks like toxic attitudes and behaviour in the Asia workplace have taken their toll. So what do we do? With so many positive changes to make, what do we prioritise?

3. Transmuting “Soft Skills” into “Critical Skills”

Various sources have predicted that other than technical skills, another group of skills is going to be key to shaping our collective future. For example, The Future of Jobs Report 2018 by the World Economic Forum states that skills like emotional intelligence, leadership, social influence and service orientation will be in demand. Other skills like creativity, negotiation, resilience and complex problem-solving will also be valuable.

We believe we need to stop referring to these skills as “soft” and instead give them the power they deserve, by renaming them “critical skills”.

Such skills were observed in our respondents’ answers too, when they were asked which uniquely human abilities will become more increasingly valuable with the rise of artificial intelligence, automation and robotics:

“...developing and embodying a robust ethical compass, increasing our sensitivity to complexity, holding space for the unknown, cultivating qualities of care and inclusion, dreaming” - Programme Manager, Education sector

“deep understandings of the needs of man and society; the ability to infuse human emotions, values and relevant service-oriented behaviour into new technologies and systems; being creative in achieving a more productive, yet inclusive society that meets the needs and maintains the dignity of all” - Educator 1

“The ability to relate to one another; to read social cues; to trust gut instincts; to be culturally attuned; to empathise; to dream; to imagine” - Professional in Education sector

We believe such competencies need to be developed as a priority in executive education, workplaces and educational institutions.

Of these though, we think one is king.

3.1 Increasing our empathy will determine Asia’s future as a global leader

Empathy expert, Dr Helen Riess shares in her book, “The Empathy Effect” (2018), that there is increasing evidence that empathy is partially hardwired into the brain and has three aspects - cognitive empathy where we take the perspective of the other; emotional empathy where we are feel what the other feels and compassionate empathy where we are moved to care and take action about the other’s welfare. Where we refer to empathy in this paper, we refer to all three aspects.

Formerly from McKinsey, Bill Drayton founded Ashoka, a premier global social entrepreneurship organisation. He has written in Forbes India Online (2012) that in this world where value is first in contributing to change, people need to master empathy, teamwork, the new leadership and changemaking first. Of these, he says, the most important is empathy, the foundation for everything else.

Many of the problems we have outlined in this paper have stemmed from an empathy deficit. Addressing this is the number one priority if we are to be fit for the present, and to be ready for the uncertainty that the future will bring. Empathy - it needs to be emphasised - is just as essential to business survival as it is for human survival:

- **Innovation** - Without understanding the needs of others, we cannot come up with ideas that solve problems in fresh ways. Microsoft CEO, Satya Nadella, has said, “The source of innovation comes from having a deep sense of empathy” (reported by Tan, 2019 in Marketing-Interactive.com). He was featured in Fast Company magazine (McCracken, 2017) for having used empathy and collaboration to engineer a USD\$250 billion turnaround there.
- **Collaboration** - This is going to be increasingly important in an age of innovation and complex change. And empathy is key to ensuring diverse parties understand and respect each other’s differences as well as similarities, for optimal synergy.
- **Customer and Employee Experience** - To attract and retain both these groups, organisations need to intimately understand what they need and serve those needs.

Our respondent, a Trends & Futures consultant says:

“The role of empathy will be absolutely critical - it guides growth of talent and the creation of people-centric brand experiences and solutions. ...The diversity of the region and growing income gaps makes empathy even more valuable - to both understand people as employees and as customers.”

The SVP of a Media company identified that empathy is what underlies many of the issues organisations must look at when dealing with people issues:

“In solving issues, conflicts, managing people, mental health, diversity, inclusion, providing work-life balance, equal opportunities - all these issues will need empathy to recognise, manage, solve and lead.”

Some respondents articulated the challenges Asia specifically will face in making empathy come to life:

Gwen Yi Wong, co-founder of Tribeless commented:

Asia is a melting pot between two of the most toxic cultural behaviors - on one hand, there is a fanatic importance to capitalism and measuring your worth by how much you earn, and on the other, a culture of secrecy and abuse and 'never airing your family's dirty laundry out to the public'...The way out of this shame and toxicity, is empathy..

Undergraduate, Chelsea Ong observed:

...we are generally more reserved when it comes to opening up emotionally to each other... there seems to be a stigmatization around introspection and vulnerability..”

Acknowledging such challenges, we, in Asia, must act with even greater commitment and resolve, at the individual level, but importantly also as a community of stakeholders invested in the thriving of our humanity - be it as leaders, business owners, workers, customers or simply as human beings.

4. The workplace as a community of transformation and wellbeing: A 5-point Plan to expedite change

We, the authors, picture our future workplaces as a warm hearth where communities thrive and feel good, do good and do well - with technology playing a supportive but never leading role. We imagine a workplace which will become a place of nurtured and supported natural transformation, healing, learning, community and safety.

Specifically, we offer the following as a plan for all stakeholders, if they are to now embrace empathy as a catalyst and contribute to useful and transformational change.

Short-Term

4.1 Build on existing communities of authentic Asia-based leaders who are standing up and shaping change.

Pioneering leaders are already building care of people, planet and purpose, alongside profit, into their business models. When such positive change agents meet and share best practices, support and encourage each other through inevitable challenges, and publicise successes, then the critical mass needed to drive momentum can be built.

There are already groups to learn from. For example, B Corp Asia is a coalition that serves a global movement of *people using business as a force for good*[™]. Their vision is to *“create a New Asian Economy, in which companies compete not only to be the best in the world, but the Best for the World[®]”*. There are over 80 B Corporations[™] in Asia which meet high standards of social and environmental performance, public transparency and legal accountability.

4.2 Mean better business with more meaningful metrics.

How a business impacts people and the planet needs to be measured. Integrating more meaningful metrics in terms of human and environmental impact into business and employee planning and reporting is an essential first step.

B Corp has an excellent impact assessment tool that anyone can access for ideas. And the Programme Manager we interviewed suggested the Common Good Balance sheet by the Economy for the Common Good movement.

The HR and OD professional we interviewed gave another example:

...while we advocate for team work, we reward only the individuals..Rewards and recognition need to be revamped completely to usher in more altruistic behaviours. More leaders with heart and not just head.

Long Term

4.3 Transformational Leadership Development

“Bottom line? The CEO of the local operation must be able to set a personal and corporate example” - our respondent, an Executive Coach

“...leaders of these businesses need to be chosen with great care as they are custodians of the real power and purpose of the organisation.” - one of our respondents, GM of a PR company

We need leaders who can lead us into the future with greater wisdom and empathy. Leadership approaches such as servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2008) and positive leadership (Cameron, 2012) are important to ensuring employee wellbeing, growth and sustainable success.

Success ahead lies in seeing purpose, corporate social responsibility, ethics and equality, diversity and inclusion and employee wellbeing embedded into the business DNA, rather than adjuncts to business as usual. It lies in social and environmental impact driving the entire business model. Genuine motivation needs to come from a philosophical belief that our true potential lies in simply doing the right thing, not just because it leads to greater profit.

We also need to acknowledge and leverage on the strengths of ground-up leaders who may not have a leadership title but live out positive values.

4.4 From Human Resources to Business Wellness Advisors

Language is key to show progressive change. “Human resources” implies that we view humans as resources to be used. Why not show positive intention to a warmer, more proactive “business wellness advisor”?

We need to transform ourselves personally and authentically to embody empathy, wisdom and a higher sense of purpose. To evolve, HR/OD/L&D practitioners need to more routinely challenge the status quo. We need to develop the moral

courage and skill to proactively influence senior management, to create a genuinely positive work culture. Negative behaviour should not be allowed to go viral, whilst positive behaviours should be proactively promoted.

We need to show wisdom and independent thought; to be discerning of when to use technology and when the human touch is needed. We need to be sensitive to when technology is causing relational disconnection, disturbance to people's well being or is unethical. As the SVP of a media company astutely observed:

"As the HR function is increasingly getting automated, the interaction with humans in the HR department has declined tremendously. This area is definitely one of the most drastically under-supported in an organisation. That talent may want to talk, discuss some areas, their concerns seem under-valued."

This discernment about technology applies to our use of e-learning too. When is it effective and when is in-person learning more effective and beneficial? And we need to have better norms to guide people away from technology overuse and misuse. Employees need rest time from having to check email, texts or WhatsApp messages.

As practitioners, we need to see that future-proofing our organisations is not solely about digital transformation. It is about helping our employees cultivate social and emotional intelligence and other critical skills that distinguish people from machines and help us serve the greater good.

Educator 2 supported this:

"Society needs self-management, collaboration, communication, and affective skills explicitly taught and learned and with this advancement in soft-skills, people will be able to realize their potential on many spectrums with the bi-product being a whole, happier individual who can bring their 'best selves' to work."

Our respondent, Chelsea Ong paints an inspiring picture for what HR could be:

"I think HR needs to learn to care for their employee's emotional well-being and needs; facilitate safe and open discourse around the interpersonal and group tensions in the system across different leadership levels; and build skills so that the system itself eventually learns how to surface tensions, heal and re-pivot itself."

4.5 The Asian Workplace as a crucible for mindful learning, wellness and evolution

C-suite leaders, HR/OD/L&D practitioners, alongside others who care, need to work together to transform the workplace in fundamental ways.

- **Whole Person Education** - Honouring employees as whole human beings, workplaces can also enable them to learn what they need to create better lives for others and themselves, whether it is financial planning, parenting or conflict resolution.

- **Health and Wellbeing** - The workplace needs to create conditions for people to experience positive physical, mental and emotional health. People have needs such as rest, dignity, appreciation, meaning, compassion, fairness, happiness and psychological safety. When they are met, they flourish and the organisation benefits from higher performance too.
- **Mindful Healing** - The OD and HR professional we interviewed notes that with automation to alleviate us of mundane work, we can then "start to do more inner work and help each other heal." We need to boldly enable people learn to work through their inner challenges with insecurity, ego, self-worth, pride, greed and heal from traumas and addictions that have led them to live a sub-optimal life and treat others poorly. The woes of the world have seeds in our inner lives.
- **Positive Changemaking** - Employees will be inspired to have a positive impact on the lives of their customers, colleagues and other stakeholders. They will become active citizens of their micro-communities, seeing change-making as part of living a meaningful life.
- **Community-Building** - We need to transform the workplace to become a safe community where people trust and care for each other and help each other become better versions of themselves. They will learn how to deal with conflicts, appreciate and value each other.

Our respondent, Phd candidate, Sujith Kumar Prankumar shared about the beauty of human relationships at work:

"...when I think of the people that I worked with, I realise just how magical sometimes life can be... these special human connections that you get that you don't get with speaking and interfacing with a machine. There's the laughter, the discomfort that sometimes comes from arguments but the respect that happens as a result of basically discussing these very challenging standpoints, ...and then the willingness to negotiate and to co-build something together."

The Professional in the Education sector developed the idea of safety:

"For people to bring their best selves to work, people need to feel safe where they work - to know that they won't be judged, evaluated or treated unfairly for who they are, and what they might bring onto the table."

- **Flexibility** - The workplace must also have more flexible structures which allow people to work more on their own terms and live more well-rounded and balanced lives. These structures need to, as undergraduate, Chelsea Ong, says, "empower individuals to make autonomous choices based on their unique talents with due accountability (more diffused leadership structure, flexible portfolios, honouring everyone's input)".

5. Conclusion

So it seems that the road ahead is long and bumpy, but yet exciting and full of possibilities. Hope comes in many forms. We have inspiration in Asia of pioneering leaders and organisations setting the bar. For example, Green Dot is a purpose-driven, plant-based restaurant chain in Singapore which cares about people and the planet. Their vision is:

To provide 100 million people with quality, plant-based diet and touch 100 million lives to go green.

In an interview with co-author (Govind), the co-founder of Green Dot, Fu Yong Hong said:

“My company’s core values are not money, money, money. They are care, love, hope. “

And each of us can ask ourselves something our respondent, Jessica Tengelder from host2transform posed:

What can you do in your own circles? What can you do if you step back and become a little bit more conscious? How can you influence your environment and make that ripple-effect a little bit bigger, by working collaboratively or asking a powerful question, so people get clarity again?

In Asia, where we have 21 of the world’s 30 largest cities, 40% of the world’s 5,000 largest companies, and with 50% of global consumption growth coming from Asia over the next decade (McKinsey, Future of Asia, 2019), now is an important and exciting time to shape great change.

If we can transform with empathy in Asia, what a powerful ripple effect we could create in the world!



Appendices

Appendix A - Author profiles

Vadivu Govind founded Human Unlimited Pte. Ltd (humanunlimited.sg), a conscious business that helps nurture more life-affirming and inspiring leadership and workplaces. Before this second calling in life, she was Asia Representative for an international nonprofit and has been committed to social change since the 1990s. She holds a Masters in Public Administration from Columbia University, New York City.

Hilary Lee has for over 25 years held senior leadership positions in the world's largest insights and consultancy businesses, serving hundreds of top global clients. She is a strategy and insights consultant who headed up Asia strategy for a global consultancy, before leaving to form Kokoro & Co. (kokoroandco.com), a collective that supports business and leaders to build more human brands for a mindful generation. She has lived and worked in Asia for over 18 years.

Appendix B - List of respondents

- Human Resource (HR) and Organisation Development (OD) Professional, Singapore
- GM of PR company, Asia remit
- Executive Coach, Singapore
- Trends & Futures Consultant, based in Singapore with Asia remit
- SVP Media Company, Singapore
- Educator 1, Singapore
- Educator 2, Singapore
- Professional in Education sector, Singapore
- Programme Manager, Education Sector, Singapore
- Tim Kelsall, Chief Client Officer Kantar, based in Singapore with Asia-Pacific remit
- Chelsea Ong, Undergraduate, Co-Founder of the Social Emotional Leadership Club at a University, Singapore
- Sujith Kumar Prankumar, PhD candidate, Australia (previously from Singapore)
- Guna Subramaniam, Singapore-based Southeast Asia Regional Advisor - Migrant Workers Programme, Institute for Human Rights and Business
- Jessica Tangelder, Founder of host2transform, a global platform to grow human-centered leadership and business to make change work in our dynamic and digital world, based in the Netherlands with international remit
- Laurent Verrier, CEO of One9ninetly, based in Singapore with Asia remit
- Gwen Yi Wong, Entrepreneur and Founder of Tribeless, a company that enables empathy through conversations, based in Malaysia with international remit
- Shirley Woon, Counsellor and Psychotherapist, The Blue Pencil, Singapore

Appendix C - Areas explored in primary research

The questions were focused on the following and for the second round of interviews, were reduced in number and sharpened. Respondents were given autonomy to choose questions and in person to person interviews, time constraints did not allow all questions to be covered.

- What role private sector businesses or corporations will play in addressing some of the bigger challenges we will face in the future in the Asia region, such as environmental and socio-demographic shifts and challenges
- How businesses might embody higher meaning or purpose, beyond financial return for shareholders, given these challenges.
- What uniquely human capacities will be valuable in the future with the rise of Artificial Intelligence, automation and robotics
- What the role of empathy would be like in the future workplace and whether this will look different in Asia
- What aspects and needs of humans are under-recognised in workplaces across Asia
- What key changes need to be made to encourage individuals to bring their best selves to work so they can make a stronger impact in Asia
- What the three biggest changes will be in Asia with regards to the way people will be working ten years from now and what the main drivers or causes of those changes might be
- How they feel about the future of work and what makes them feel this way
- Any other comments they would make based on their personal or professional experience

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