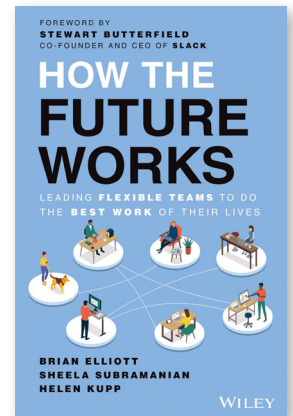


How the Future Works

Leading Flexible Teams To Do The Best Work of Their Lives

by **Brian Elliott, Sheela Subramanian, Helen Kupp**



Contents

Why Flexible Works

Page 2

Flexible Work Principles

Page 2

Guardrails for Behavior

Page 3

Team Level Agreements

Page 4

Make Digital Your New Headquarters

Page 5

Soft Skills Managers Need

Page 6

The Doom Loop and Boom Loop

Page 7

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

When the pandemic hit, offices basically closed overnight, and everyone was forced into a kind of grand experiment. Just like we have seen with company after company, in industry after industry, the nature of work changed. In the beginning, most companies—and most people, in fact—thought the shift would be temporary, but as lockdowns were extended, most workers began settling into a rhythm.

These new, more flexible work practices were shown to actually *increase productivity*. Flexible work offers a real opportunity, not just to attract and retain talent, but to transform the way people work and unlock their potential. In *How the Future Works: Leading Flexible Teams To Do The Best Work of Their Lives*, authors and members of Slack’s Future Forum consortium Brian Elliott, Sheela Subramanian, Helen Kupp embrace the notion that that 9-5 is a concept that just doesn’t resonate with most knowledge workers today and lay out a seven-step process for getting to how the future works.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why flexible work works
- The competitive advantage of flexible work
- The seven steps to making flexible work successful
- How to focus on outcome over activity

Why Flexible Work Works

Flexible work is more of a mindset than a specific set of rules or policies. It's about freeing oneself from the outdated notion that work = office and the workweek = 9-to-5.

Instead we can push the boundaries of how we think about the ways in which we can work together and offer people more freedom and autonomy to get things done in ways that suit them better. We can choose to focus on which model is going to drive the best outcomes for our business, rather than on where and when work takes place.

This requires some flexible thinking.

For example, the reason why Working From Home is generally not the most beneficial version of flexible work is because the *when* is actually more important than the *where*. You see, most of the time when people talk about flexibility, they talk about location. But schedule flexibility is actually far more important.

A Future Forum survey of more than 10,000 knowledge workers across six countries found that 76% want flexibility in *where* they work but a whopping 93% said they want flexibility in *when* they work.

Because the vast majority of workers are asking for it might be reason enough to consider changing how you work, but it's hardly the only reason. When done right, flexible work offers numerous benefits that can give your organization a real competitive edge.

The Competitive Advantage

Flexible work helps companies win the battle for talent, engage employees, and build better results by having a proven positive impact in the areas of:

- Recruiting
- Retention
- Productivity
- Creativity
- Innovation
- Customer Engagement
- Diversity
- Your Bottom Line

Given all the potential benefits to flexible work, one has to ask: Why isn't everyone doing this? One of the biggest rea-

sons why flexible work hasn't always worked in the past, and can still fail today, is because companies don't always get it right. *How the Future Works* is going to show you how with 7 steps to getting there.

Step 1: Stand for Something: Agree on Purpose and Principles

Flexibility will only succeed if you are willing to set aside outdated conceptions of how work should be done and think differently. But with so many different ideas about what flexibility can mean to each person, team, and company, it can be hard to band together and create this kind of shift.

Too many organizations have jumped into defining a flexible work strategy without understanding WHY they're implementing it, other than the fact that their employees want it or they want to keep up with peer companies who are already doing it. To move forward, your leadership team needs to talk through the real business purpose behind flexible work. Purposes may vary somewhat from company to company, but your main Flexible Work Purpose will almost surely center on your people.

Flexible Work Purpose: A statement explaining the main purpose behind your flexible work strategy. It should clearly articulate *why* flexibility is important to your company and be compatible with your organization's overall purpose and values.

Flexible Work Principles: Similar to company values, principles are core beliefs and values that support the organization's flexible work purpose. They are not specific mandates or rules, but guidance to help communicate how you expect people to behave, how they can make decisions that align with your intentions, and generally bring your *why* to life.

Your Flexible Work Principles: How Can You Support Your Purpose?

Principles don't look too different from core company values in some ways. They're not focused on the tactical how (like how many days you should be coming into the office), but more on the mindset required to make a significant shift in how you do business. Principles are meant to be shared across an organization in order to provide direction, consistency, and inspiration as people make the big changes required to enable flexible work. Allow for flexibility in the execution of your strategy, and enable individual department and team leaders to decide what works best for their

It's time to rethink the meeting. Leaders need to get a lot more intentional about the time they are taking up on people's calendars.

group—but within a framework and with top-level guidance. Any decision that gets made at any level—about how often a team will meet, for example, or how to measure team or individual success—should be consistent with those principles.

Step 2: Level the Playing Field: Create Guardrails for Behavior

Principles guide executive decision-making, but principles at the executive level are not enough: You also need guardrails to make sure those principles can be translated throughout your organization in ways that are effective and keep the playing field level so you can get the best out of all your people.

What Are Guardrails?

Guardrails are agreed-upon guidelines or parameters for behavior that will keep your principles in place. They will help people translate your principles into day-to-day habits and practices that support your flexible work strategy.

There are three main areas where they are needed most:

1. Leadership guardrails:
2. Workplace guardrails
3. Culture guardrails

Leadership Guardrails: Leaders set the tone from the top by modeling the right behaviors.

- **Lead by Example:** If you, as a leader, are still coming into the office on a typical 9-to-5 schedule every day, then you're sabotaging the strategy and undermining its principles (even if you don't mean to). No matter what you say, no matter what your official policy states, if employees see you in the office regularly, they will believe they need to do the same if they want access to growth and opportunities.
- **Show Vulnerability:** Normalize flexibility and help people feel more comfortable with it. You can do this by saying hi to the kid who accidentally interrupts a video call—or better yet, by bringing your own family on to wave a quick hello.

Workplace Guardrails: Redesign the role of the workplace to keep people from reverting back to old habits.

- **Shared Space is for Teamwork First:** Showing up to the office is no longer the default; it's the exception. Be intentional about the role of the office, getting teams together for a purpose that is planned in advance.
- **Keep a Level Playing Field:** Avoid “in-person favoritism” by enabling remote participants to be equally present and part of the discussion. Slack adopted the guardrail of “one dial in, all dial in,” meaning that either everyone gets together in a room for a meeting or everyone participates remotely, even if that means logging on to a video conference from a desk in the office.

Culture Guardrails: A flexible work culture is going to be different than an in-office one, naturally. But more than that, it provides companies with the opportunity to address some challenges that have long been part of traditional workplace cultures.

- **Move Beyond Meeting-Driven Culture:** There are real questions about whether meetings are necessary to get things done, or if they are getting in our way far too often. It's time to rethink the meeting. Leaders need to get a lot more intentional about the time they are taking up on people's calendars. Dropbox uses their “3D” model for planning meetings: debate, discuss, decide. Slack would add a fourth D for “develop.” If a meeting doesn't achieve at least one of those four objectives, then it doesn't need to be a meeting.
- **Challenge the Role of the Brainstorm:** Numerous studies show that the often lauded brainstorming session is a waste of time, at best; at worst it can lead to the dreaded groupthink and even harm productivity. So-called “brainwriting” has been shown to be a better way to generate new ideas, and it requires a kind of hybrid approach that flexible work is particularly well suited for. Brainwriting starts with individual work, allowing time and space for people to think deeply and freely about ideas. You ask everyone to commit their ideas to paper, and only then are they shared and debated.

Step 3: Commit to How You'll Work: Develop Team-Level Agreements

The Team-Level Agreement (TLA) takes your principles and guardrails and puts them into practice. To get started, you can use a starter template, based on Slack's own Digital-First efforts. It has five categories to kick things off:

1. Values
2. Schedules and Meetings
3. Accountability
4. Relationships
5. Checking In

Values: What Do We Value in Our Working Environment as a Team?

If your flexible work purpose is to unlock potential in your people, then start with what's important to those people. What do *they* value? To spur discussion on this topic, you may find that your company's flexible work principles are a useful guide.

Schedules and Meetings: How Will We Collaborate?

A flexible schedule is not the same as having no schedule at all. Rather than having set "working hours," what works best in most cases is for teams to set what's called "core collaboration hours."

This is generally an agreed-upon three-to-four-hour time-span during the day when team members can expect to be "live" and available to one another for things like meetings and feedback. By focusing on shorter bursts of collaboration time, you unlock a lot more productivity as a team.

Better meeting hygiene is a universal need to make all work, not just flexible work, more successful. Start by rethinking your meeting culture. Meetings should be for when team members need to engage in the Four Ds—discuss, debate, decide, develop. If you're not doing that, the meeting should be canceled. Depending on your team members, it might also be important to consider how (or if) you use videos for meetings. Reducing the use of video can help reduce fatigue but also helps level the playing field for individuals who might not have the ideal video-on situation at home.

Accountability: How Do We Hold Each Other Accountable?

For flexible work to be successful, teams need to measure success by outcomes, not by how many hours someone works in a day, or by how many meetings someone attends. To do that, teams need to focus on defining outcomes, roles, and responsibilities upfront and communicating as changes and different needs arise.

Relationships: Coming Together as a Team

While executives need to be thinking about how to build connection across a flexible organization, individual teams can play a part too by being explicit about what will help build relationships among their fellow team members. As a team, consider things like committing to celebrating one another's successes both publicly and within the team and to being honest about when you are overloaded or need support, both personally and professionally.

Checking-in: Evolving Out Team Agreements Over Time

The TLA should be reconsidered regularly to ensure that the norms team members agreed on actually support their work, instead of getting in the way of it. Teams may find they need to add more norms as they go and discover what works. Or, they may end up simplifying, finding that too many norms are counterproductive.

The Process: How to Use a Starter Template to Get Agreement

Take the Slack starter template and use it to create a flexible TLA that's specific to your company and makes clear its objectives, while still providing teams with relevant examples and options, as a framework in which they can make decisions. Follow these best practices to create your organization's own template TLA and then cascade it from there:

1. Customize the Slack starter template for your organization
2. Create early champions for change by piloting with a few teams
3. Disseminate to additional teams with context and guidance
4. Create a way for teams to give feedback and share best practices

A digital HQ means that digital space, rather than a physical office building, is the primary place where people can access information, opportunity, and each other.

Step 4: Experiment, Experiment, Experiment: Normalize a Culture of Learning

How do you make a shift this significant happen, especially when some people—especially those in decision-making positions—are personally happy with how things were before? It will require a process of experimenting, learning, and making adjustments in both behavior and thinking if you want it to stick, and not everything is going to work perfectly from the start.

There will be no perfect data point or external benchmark that will convince everyone that flexible work will work. Radical change can be scary, so you need to build evidence that it can work locally. It takes a mix of a little leap of faith to allow experimentation, executive support to prototype new ways of working, and a willingness to learn your way toward habits and practices that work for your people.

You have to experiment and learn, stay agile and make adjustments (because not every experiment is going to work on the first try), and communicate every step of the way to bring people along. It won't happen all at once—you need to build momentum and support as you move forward and figure out how to make it work.

We recommend that all organizations form a diverse task force to drive this change. The following guidance will help:

- Your task force should be composed of respected leaders and change agents, as well as people willing to ask hard questions.
- Both company leaders and task force members need to recognize this work as a real investment. It requires a sizable dedication of time and resources.
- Task force members should identify and draw from teams that are already trying new ways of working or willing to experiment.
- Those who are working to create this change need to be supported by dedicated resources from core groups—like internal communications, learning and

development specialists, and executives who can scale the effort and allocate resources.

Whether it's small experiments or high-level decisions about the principles behind your flexible work strategy, a good rule of thumb for leaders to always keep in mind is to *do your work in public*. It's important that executives and task force members don't sequester ideas, decisions, and thinking for months on end. Giving a sense of where you're going, the progress you're making along the way, and transparently sharing everything you can generates trust and builds momentum.

There is no “done” when creating a better way of working. You're never done experimenting. You're never done learning. And you're never done communicating with people about what you're aiming for and how it's going.

Step 5: Create a Culture of Connection from Anywhere: Reimagine Your Headquarters

There are a wider range of options than just showing up every day at the traditional corporate headquarters. In fact, if done right, flexible work can provide an opportunity to create a more connected and inclusive culture than ever before. This step is about what we can do to start building connections in new ways, ones that support flexible work and forge better, stronger bonds.

Make Digital Your New Headquarters

Flexible work requires companies to reconceptualize the “workplace.” It should no longer be thought of as merely a building, but as a network of equally important forums where work can take place and connections can be made. One of these forums could be a video conference, or a Slack project channel just as easily as it could be a conference room. It could be a shared collaborative document like Google Docs, Quip, or Notion, just as easily as it could be an in-person gathering for a PowerPoint presentation.

Communication can happen via platforms, emails, chats,

phone calls, huddles, direct messaging, social media, or in person. And people can engage in those communications from home, their car, while traveling, or in an office building. The place and the method matter much less than the quality of interaction taking place. That means thinking about digital with the same level of intentionality and investment as office space has gotten in the past.

The best way to break old habits and reconceptualize the workplace is to make digital space your new headquarters. A digital HQ means that digital space, rather than a physical office building, is the primary place where people can access information, opportunity, and each other.

Step 6: Train Your Leaders to Make it Work: “Soft” Skills Matter More than Ever

Throughout this era of uncertainty, at least one workforce reality hasn't changed and it is unlikely to change anytime soon: the critical role that managers play in your business and in the lives of employees. But here's the harsh reality: Most of your managers are not equipped to embrace flexible working arrangements or lead distributed teams. Managers need to shift from gatekeepers who conduct status checks to coaches who lead with empathy. They need to get to know the people on their team, not just the skill sets to get the work done. In short, the role of a manager needs a new definition. This step will guide leaders in helping managers regain their footing and equip them for this new way of working.

We would like to propose a new definition and purpose for managers to replace the old views. The role of today's manager is to do three things: inspire trust, create clarity, and unlock the potential within their teams. In practice, this means:

1. Being transparent about the purpose, measurements, and expectations as a way to build trust.
2. Providing clarity for team members on their responsibilities and goals through direct (and two-way) feedback.
3. Unlocking potential for team members to do their best work through equitable practices and saying “no.”

Soft Skills Managers Need to Support this Re-definition

- Building psychological safety

- Communicating transparently
- Leading with empathy
- Offer regular feedback, including career growth conversations
- Accept and own mistakes, creating a culture of acceptance
- Model inclusive practices and reset practices that create exclusion
- Show how to build boundaries to avoid burnout and allow for focused work
- Permission to say “no”

Leaders can invest in reskilling managers to make this shift and enable flexible work through coaching, structured feedback, and celebrations of managers doing it right.

Step 7: Focus on the Outcomes: Avoid the Doom Loop and Embrace the Boom Loop

Companies that are successful in adopting flexible work strategies are also implementing new strategies for measuring how it's working. Flexible work arrangements have a tendency to bring to the surface common challenges around trust. Some leaders feel like they won't be able to know if their teams are working if they're not in the office or if they're unable to monitor when they're online.

The issue with monitoring, however, is that it's ineffective at best; at worst it undermines trust, hinders performance, negatively impacts employee satisfaction and overall morale, and contributes to burnout. Leaders at all levels who try monitoring tactics run the risk of getting caught up in what we call:

The Doom Loop: an unhappy cycle of *monitoring*, which leads to *meaningless metrics* and time wasted on reporting, which leads to effort wasted on checking the boxes or *avoidance* of the monitoring systems, which leads to talent attrition, which compounds a *loss of trust*, which tend to lead to more *monitoring*. And on and on it spirals.

Organizations must focus on outcomes over activity.

Quantity should never triumph over quality. Success requires clear goals set at both the company and team levels. This is important, not just to meet business outcomes, but

also to foster the kind of culture you want to build—the kind that will help you win the war for talent.

It's through this kind of reorientation that companies can avoid The Doom Loop. Instead, trust gets built by being clear about shared goals and giving people the support and room they need to meet them. We call this The Boom Loop.

The key roles of managers and leaders is to build trust, create clarity, and unlock potential as outlined previously. In this context, that means figuring out which outcomes matter, how those translate into deliverables, and how to set expectations to timeframe and quality.

In other words, people need to understand what's expected of them (clarity), they need to believe that their work is measured fairly (trust), and they need freedom within these clearly articulated parameters to do their best work (unlock potential). These things are essential for driving outcomes-based measures.

We believe that flexible work is the future, and there are a lot of reasons why businesses need to start embracing the future now. Your people want it. It's a competitive advantage that opens up your hiring pool far beyond commuting distance from the office. It helps unlock potential, fostering inclusion that leads to better business outcomes. But there's another reason, too, that we think is worth considering before we send you on your way: Flexible work can make a real difference in people's lives, including your own.

Because none of us are *just* workers after all. We're all human beings who work. What we have all seen during this

grand experiment that the pandemic has forced upon us is that being given the power and the freedom to do our best work together can be transformative—for people *and* for the companies they work for.



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