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## Chapter I

# Plentiful Work We Enjoy – A First in Human History

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*I don't go to work; it's just happening all the time. I wouldn't call it my work. I'd call it my life.*

*Artist and filmmaker, Steve McQueen<sup>1</sup>*

Inspirational, innovative, affordable technology that transports words, images and ideas around the world at previously impossible speeds. Sound familiar? Of course it does – it's the world we inhabit today, isn't it? Yes, it certainly is, but these words refer equally well to the exhilarating period in the fifteenth century when Johannes Gutenberg first brought movable type printing to Europe. His radical invention precipitated the thrilling arrival of the first printed (and therefore cheap) books. Just like today, profound innovation energized a communication revolution that would sweep virally across the planet.

Invigorated by the Gutenberg Press, an unprecedented 200-year period followed, which saw an outpouring of artistic, cultural, educational, political, scientific and social exuberance that later became known as 'The Renaissance' or rebirth. The epicentre of this revolution in ideas, culture and commerce was Italy but its effects extended across Europe and even worldwide. One man who exemplified this extraordinary phase in human history was Michelangelo, the quintessential 'Renaissance Man' – the Steve Jobs of his day. This first (for we are now, in my view, experiencing a second) Renaissance required not only creative release but also the 'infrastructure' of printing presses and a plentiful supply of paper to get underway. No press, no paper, no renaissance.

So where is the parallel today? For the medium of the printing press, read Internet; for cheap availability of paper, think almost limitless data. In early 2014, there are 6 billion with mobile phones (out of a human population of 7 billion). Each moment, all across the globe, people draw on ever-increasing computing power and virtually infinite amounts of data. The digital connections forged are transforming every aspect of how we live and work, reshaping our view of being human. Immediate access to one

single connected web for ever-larger numbers of people is enabling a communication and connection revolution without precedent in human history.

Just as in the first Renaissance, we are witnessing the arrival of new trades, businesses and economic models, sweeping aside established patterns that had seemed permanent. Before the Italian Renaissance, economic activity was propelled by a wealthy aristocracy, underpinned by a poor 'peasant class'. The Renaissance stimulated the emergence of an entirely new class: a 'middle class', who entered banking, merchant trading and crafts (with accompanying guilds springing up to represent this pioneering, financially successful group). Today, at this early stage in the 'Digital Renaissance', the trajectories that such overarching shifts will take are not yet clear, but we are already getting used to hearing previously impossible stories of start-up tech entrepreneurs and their entourages achieving hyper-wealth in a few years. There is even a steady stream of bizarre tales emerging of teenagers becoming millionaires before they are old enough to leave school.

Seemingly established economic cornerstones seem fragile: many younger people in the US and Europe regard car ownership as an option but not an essential, helping fuel a steady rise in the car-sharing economy; hotels and taxis see their business side-swiped by peer-to-peer trading formats such as the popular apps Airbnb and Uber; a search box on a screen attracts more than a billion questions each day from 181 countries in 146 languages, turning Google into one of the most profitable businesses in the world; millions on YouTube watch a fruit-seller in Tunisia being beaten up and a year later several Middle East dictatorships have collapsed. Meanwhile, a novelty pop video from South Korea is viewed nearly 2 billion times and an accompanying silly dance transcends national cultures to become a truly global phenomenon.

If you were alive in a remarkable period, how would you know? Look for evidence. A teenager in Africa with a smartphone can now access all written human knowledge, something even the US President could not come close to 20 years ago. Or simply walk outside your door and observe your fellow citizens as they constantly and easily enter their digital worlds; or consider the largest revolution ever in medicine as it starts to transition from a culture of curing illness to one of prevention and early detection, based on advanced remote and self-monitoring techniques; or marvel at IBM's artificial intelligence machine Watson, which (as I was told during a visit to the company's impressive Zurich research centre) can study and pass models of medical exams with 100 per cent accuracy in three seconds; or watch enormous robotic trucks move tons of iron ore and waste around a mine, operated remotely from a centre hundreds of miles away. It may not always feel like it on a gloomy day in winter but we are currently alive in one of the most astonishing periods in human history.

When I began writing my previous book *The Digital Workplace: How technology is liberating work* in 2010,<sup>2</sup> the landscape of the new digital world was already in view in outline but the precise contours, valleys, hills and pathways were still indistinct. We could feel the digital pulse (after all we already carried around mobile manifestations of the changes afoot in our pockets) but what would happen once the finer detail began to emerge? Four years on, we are in the midst of a Digital Renaissance that is reaching into every aspect of our now super-connected planet. This Digital Renaissance touches all aspects of life, but our focus is work, so in this book my co-author Elizabeth Marsh and I will explore work itself, specifically the digital workplace and the digital transformation of work in a renaissance era.

## We are All Artists and Artisans Now

It is as if work itself has been released after a long prison sentence, casting off its shackles. Want to start a global business worth £20 million at 15 years old? No reason why not ... as Nick D'Aloisio discovered in his south London bedroom when he created the news app Summly.<sup>3</sup> Tired of trudging to the same old dreary office building each day? Then shape your week so you can flex between home, clients and the office. Concerned about your ageing mum who needs to live with you? So get elderly care provided by your employer when you need it. Lost your steady job but you have great architectural skills? Then connect with oDesk and find a rich range of freelance projects within 25 miles of where you live. You have no scientific knowledge but do have access to a search engine? Then maybe you can save lives, just as Jake Andraka has done at the age of 15 through his invention of a revolutionary pancreatic cancer detector.<sup>4</sup>

A renaissance brings with it seismic, unexpected, uplifting and often disruptive change. The Digital Renaissance comes with all of this and with accompanying challenges too. For example, where will the jobs be when machines can handle ever more types of not only manual but knowledge work as well? That said, taken as a whole, in my opinion the new digital worlds of work are overwhelmingly positive for us as individuals, organizations, nations and even the planet. For instance, as the Digital Renaissance of Work takes hold, one core benefit is the liberating effect technology can have on the ways we work. No one expected an enhanced quality of experience in work through this digital revolution but it is nevertheless one profoundly significant consequence of the Digital Renaissance. How work feels to us affects each of our lives deeply, and positive changes in its nature can bring widespread benefits to us as individuals, to our organizations and to the societies we inhabit.

My formative years were in the 1960s and 70s, when work was, by and large, considered a duty, an obligation, an economic necessity to be endured rather than an activity that

could bring fulfilment, passion and pleasure. I can remember uncles and family friends quizzing me at 13 years old about what I wanted to be 'when I grew up'. Partly being cheeky, yet also reflective, I would reply: 'I want to find out who I am and why I am here'... and that would pretty much always bring the conversation to an abrupt end. What I was really saying was that I wanted to find some meaning for my work and for my life. I looked around for people to emulate and the only ones I could find tended to be musicians and artists: David Bowie, Lou Reed, Andy Warhol, Harold Pinter. I was struck by how they exuded a relish for their work and appeared to be creating lives worth living.

## The End of the 'Protestant Work Ethic'

Work historically has been shaped by what we call the 'Protestant work ethic'. For most people it has been something to suffer in order to pay the bills. The only people who seemed to work directly for satisfaction and stimulation were artists. Sculptor Henry Moore would work seven days a week from early morning into the evening; pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim would practise and perform constantly. It is not that such artists exist in a permanently delirious, ecstatic state – practice as a musician is monotonous and much artistic endeavour requires intense effort and struggle – but more that their overall experience can be deeply fulfilling.

Until recently, work for most people has destroyed us, damaging family lives and leaving us exhausted and sick. The dreary commute to the office, as described in my last book, represents a form of gentrified slavery whereby managers insist on our physical habitual presence so that they can 'watch us work', fixating on the illusion of effort rather than the real quality of what we actually produce.

But the Digital Renaissance of Work, brought about by the digital workplace, is causing this Protestant work ethic to wither. Nowadays we can often 'carry' our work, our colleagues and our networks with us wherever we choose, selecting when to work, where we work and, increasingly, our preferred style of work. Some of the privileges of the artistic life (to design and fashion each day based on what attracts us) are becoming available to more and more people, either fully or at least partially. We are experiencing a new 'digital work ethic' based not on duty and suffering but on passion and fulfilment. One indicator of this new digital work ethic is that the media is now awash with tales of work-related struggles as we find ourselves working through vacations, mismanaging our digital connection habits and in need of 'digital detox'. Certainly we work for more hours now, partly because the technology allows us to, but also because our enjoyment of work is increasing. Frequently the challenge is less about overcoming the drudgery and tedium of work and more about controlling (or failing to control) our addiction to work.

Take an assistant marketing manager for Dove soap. What does her day look like? It's Thursday and that means the morning starts with the school run. Having dropped the kids off, she pops into a local café for breakfast, fires up her iPad, logs onto Yammer for microblogging with colleagues, Lync conferencing for all audio and video, and email. She begins to communicate effortlessly with colleagues around the world who have left overnight messages. Another coffee and it's time for a weekly conference call via her noise-cancelling headset, before heading home to sign off expenses and review online CVs from shortlisted applicants ahead of interviews that will happen at the Berlin office the next day. As she walks through the park to collect her children, she chats to an account manager in London.

Or there is the Verizon field engineer who downloads his work schedule of home visits to his mobile in the evening. Each job for the next day has been system-planned with enough travel time built in and information about parking provided, while the back-office automation of the customer order has already been handled. All he needs on arrival is to be handed the smart card that was posted direct to the customer two days earlier. Tomorrow, by his design, he will work a half-day as he has requested shift changes in order to free him up to attend a hospital appointment with his elderly father, who moved into the family home the previous year. During the first assignment of the day, he hits a snag with no obvious solution, so he uses his own corporate-approved tablet to get a colleague to remote-test the system. After that fails, an advanced intranet search allows him to access user-generated videos from other engineers and he discovers a fantastic 90 seconds from a colleague in Boston, who has successfully fixed the exact same problem.

## A Digital Groundswell of Change

But, I can hear you protesting ... these two people aren't artists. True, they aren't, but they do now enjoy aspects of the artist in their work for the first time ever. They have choice, flexibility and now, through digital innovations, they also have easy access to a wealth of knowledge. What this does is to engender a sense of power over how they work as well as to bring new satisfaction from the quality of their work. Research is clear that this autonomy and sense of control is what the majority of the workforce aspires to. A 2013 survey conducted by PwC, the largest study ever into workplace attitudes, suggests that 66 per cent of millennials would like to shift their work hours to be more flexible.<sup>5</sup>

However, aside from the artist, there is another role emerging with this new digital rebirth of work; that of the artisan. An artisan is a skilled craftsman. In the past, the term referred to those who made furniture, household items or even machines, and artisans

can, through experience and aptitude, reach the expressive levels of the artist. Artisans take pride in their work and enjoy a sense of their own power as they pursue their craft. The Verizon engineer is more artisan than artist; his job remains fairly routine but, thanks to the digital workplace, he can now improve his working conditions and habits, and consequently his enjoyment of work increases. He can bring results more effectively to the customers he meets and worry less about the errors that would have plagued such visits in the past. In both the Dove and Verizon examples, the Protestant work ethic feels thinner and less present, while the new 'digital work ethic', a new way of experiencing work in the digital age, emerges. This is an unstoppable groundswell sweeping through all types of work and at all levels in organizations. The frontline workers – field engineers, retail staff, warehouse operators, logistics and delivery drivers – were once the 'digitally disenfranchised'; now they are the newly 'digitally empowered', with data, knowledge and access all available via the smartphones and tablets in their hands.

The beauty of this new digital work experience is that mundane, routine roles can become enriched by connection and knowledge; people are empowered and their daily experience of work can be transformed. Remember how hard Daniel Barenboim had to practise? It is not that work is released from the hardship of activity but that the context of work shifts as power begins to reside more within our own design. Giving data and information to the previously 'digitally denied' sends positive shockwaves through people and organizations. Call centre staff at holiday company Mark Warner, for instance, now operate mostly from home, finding a new liberation and control over how they work. They still answer calls as they would in a centralized centre but do so within a structure that gives them flexibility and choice.<sup>6</sup> Routine tasks become instantly more rewarding once we can influence when and where we perform them.

## Barclays Transcends Barriers

Barclays Bank has around 20,000 customer-facing staff in 1,600 retail branches and call centres. Despite this cadre of employees being custodians of delivering customer experience, they were previously excluded digitally, not even having their own email addresses. To remedy this, the bank has implemented a new mobile intranet environment, called MyZone, which is available on the staff's own personal devices, at last providing them with an effective method of accessing digital content. MyZone has very extensive functionality with content delivered in a series of 'zones', such as NewsZone and KnowledgeZone, including features such as news, HR information and videos. The content and features have been driven by user feedback.

Both adoption and feedback have been very strong. After just six months there were already around 13,000 users registered, with approximately 1,000 unique logins each



day, and the site has won awards. Within MyZone, the KnowledgeZone includes key product and process information, which is already available via the desktop. This is now readily accessible, with the critical information available in bite-sized chunks. It is widely acknowledged that an incredible 50 per cent decline in customer complaints about staff product knowledge in the first six months of 2013 was partly attributed to MyZone.

MyZone has also supported Barclays' current emphasis on providing digital products for its customers through an 'AppZone', where staff can download and sample customer-facing apps. This has helped to create ambassadors for the bank's digital products with tangible results. In the first half of 2013, MyZone contributed to a 500 per cent increase in the run rate of customer registrations and a 2 per cent rise in the Net Promoter Score for digital products.

Perhaps the most important contribution from MyZone is in improving employee engagement. In the first six months of 2013, there was a rise of 22 per cent in employee engagement and a level of 97 per cent achieved for colleague satisfaction in the branches. The team feels that MyZone has made a significant contribution to this, principally because employees now 'have a voice', showing that they are both trusted and listened to by senior management.<sup>7</sup>

What we are seeing, albeit in the early stages, is a new definition and design of work for modern, advanced organizations and – in less time than we expected – for all organizations that want to remain viable commercially and socially. Others who fail to adopt and enable such digital investments in the daily working experience for staff and contractors will find themselves not only unable to attract people but, just as importantly, incapable of trading effectively and competitively in their marketplaces. If we take the Barclays example, what option do other retail banks in the UK market, where MyZone is now operating, have than to match that digital experience for staff and customers? With 97 per cent staff satisfaction, a 500 per cent increase in customer registrations and a 50 per cent decline in customer complaints, the improvements are not marginal, they are dramatic.

## The Third Transformation of Work

This Digital Renaissance of Work is the third major work transformation to take place in the past 1,000 years. In the first Renaissance, new trades, crafts and professions were developed to meet the new world order as global trade came into being. This was followed a few centuries later by another technically precipitated revolution when the Industrial Revolution, powered by the steam engine, created factories, then offices and

the cities where most people still live. The effect of the Industrial Revolution was a hugely productive phase for nations but a destructive and cruel period for work itself. In the nineteenth century, Charles Dickens chronicled the pain of the factory; then offices took over as the dreary and soul-destroying places managers and administrators would trudge into day in, day out. Certainly, we still have no shortage of archaic companies (and managers within them), who insist on outmoded work formats, demanding that staff come to a fixed physical space each day. The Google culture, for instance, may be inspiring in many ways, but its insistence on face-time in large offices every day is a straitjacket for staff who expect to be able to choose how and where they work.

The exciting development though is that this third major transformation is beginning to liberate work and to usher in an era in which everyone in work has increased capacity to derive far more reward (beyond financial) from their daily endeavour. What is so inspiring to see is that this increase in fulfilment from work does not simply apply to purely managerial or knowledge-based roles, but also to many more repetitive roles undertaken by workers in call centres, factories, delivery operations and warehouses, where digital empowerment (as we have seen with Barclays) can create a dramatically better experience of work. In turn, this can help to stimulate innovation, drive competitive advantage and bring other fundamental organizational benefits, which ensue when we are fully engaged in our work. This book charts the scope and scale of this digital transformation of work and how to implement essential changes inside your own work and organizations.

## How Zara Does It

The implications of the Digital Renaissance of Work are far-reaching, stretching beyond the individual worker to company processes and culture. One example illustrating this release from tedium and the resulting wider business effects can be found in successful clothing store Zara, which has become the world's largest fashion retailer. One of the reasons Zara has been able to trump its competitors is through the digital design of its work processes, which embed digital connections into all parts of the staff experience. Through this, Zara is able not only to respond to customer trends and tastes quicker than everybody else but also to feed its young consumers' appetite for a continual supply of new designs; the company can produce a new garment in ten to 15 days from design.<sup>8</sup>

Mobile technology deployed within the retail units is very important and Zara has been an early adopter, using mobile devices in one form or another since the 1990s. Sales assistants have had personal digital assistants (PDAs) since the early 2000s, allowing them to immediately transmit customer reactions to sales and to record opinions. When a sales assistant asks a customer a relevant question about their experience, the responses can



be recorded in real-time. Supplemented by real sales data, this allows Zara to develop powerful insights and to respond rapidly with a constant stream of new designs in store. Gone are the days of the bored sales assistant mindlessly enquiring ‘Can I help you?’ Instead we find the new digitally knowledgeable retailer who can connect the Zara marketplace with production and witness the difference on the shelves within weeks.<sup>9,10,11</sup>

Now, I can hear the protestations from those who counter: ‘But my job is still awful ... What about the street-sweeper? Many people hate their work and would retire tomorrow ... that’s why they buy a lottery ticket each week. Just who are you kidding? Work as enjoyment, give me a break!’ Of course I don’t believe that every working role has somehow miraculously been transformed overnight into a paradise previously reserved for Picasso or Moby, but more that a digital groundswell of change is happening and beginning to unstitch the way work is structured and how it is performed – and doing so relentlessly and for the better.

Even in situations that many would regard as some of the toughest working conditions in the world, and where the benefits of technology would seem least likely to be felt, the digital workplace is helping to drive change for the better. For example, UK high street retail institution M&S is now using mobile technology to directly survey all the employees who work in its supply chain within India and Sri Lanka, to ensure that working conditions and employee satisfaction adhere to standards the company and its customers would want to see.<sup>12</sup>

As the Digital Renaissance of work evolves, the impact waves of the digital workplace will crash constantly on the shores of every organization, both large and small, from 500,000-person Deutsche Post/DHL to one-man band AAA Plumbing and Heating Services, creating both huge challenges and beneficial effects for those who choose to embrace the changes. The trend for staff using their own devices for work (so-called Bring Your Own Device; BYOD) is just an early tide flowing in and resistance is futile.

## The Digital Journeys Addison Lee Makes

Take, for example, London-based cab company, Addison Lee, which is a digital tour de force in the private hire car industry. There will be more on this later but, as a taster, just one aspect is that their call centre, like Mark Warner, is not one centralized office space; this operation includes the ability for those handling the calls to work from home, using a flexible shift pattern system. For the customer, the experience is identical to calling the main centre but for the home-based staff the option to pick and choose the design of their working day produces happier, more committed and productive staff – even though the task of answering the calls has not inherently become any more interesting.<sup>13</sup>

Embedding routine tasks with choice and influence fosters empowerment in the new digital world of work. The complaints we now have around work tend to be not so much about boredom but instead concern digital addiction, unhealthy work–life boundaries, lack of flexibility through antiquated management, or insecurity from frequent restructuring and instant redundancies.

Shout it from the rooftops: work itself is becoming inherently more stimulating, rewarding and satisfying – for the first time in human history.

## Notes

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