PRODUCTIVE WORKPLACES REVISITED

Dignity, Meaning, and Community in the 21st Century

Marvin R. Weisbord
About This Book

Why is this topic important?

*Productive Workplaces Revisited* updates the first edition to validate "getting the whole system in the room," a principle that has influenced large scale projects everywhere. The book provides a model, guidelines, and successful methods for improving organizations under conditions of nonstop change. The revised edition may be the only book of its kind, for it includes follow-ups to ten projects done fifteen to thirty years earlier; the author not only reports what happened afterward, but also draws implications for managers and consultants today. With this "glance backward," the book challenges the myth that you can "build in" practices that ensure continuity of new norms when leadership, staff, markets, technology, and ownership are constantly changing. "Each new generation," says Weisbord, "must learn all over again for itself."

What can you achieve with this book?

You can learn how to establish conditions for success before undertaking complex change projects. You will gain a deeper appreciation of key management practices and why some work better than others. The book will lead you to rethink, appreciate, and learn from your own experience and confirm that values matter more than techniques. It will help you become more secure and competent to face unprecedented dilemmas of organizational change.

How is this book organized?

The book contains three parts, and all have been revised to expand the scope and depth of the original. Part One tells key stories from management history, comparing the work of Frederick Taylor, "father of scientific management," to that of several social scientists who came after. Part Two presents cases involving typical managerial dilemmas that illustrate an evolution in practice from expert problem solving toward involving everyone in whole-systems improvement made necessary by conditions of nonstop change. The cases are updated in the 2000s, with implications for today. Two new chapters on seminal workshops in primary
medical care and steel production show the benefits of having whole systems study themselves. Part Three presents a practice theory for managing and consulting in the new millennium. It includes key guidelines for success as well as methods by which the theory can be applied, and it shows how one company saved itself using these guidelines. It includes two new chapters on whole-systems improvement and a new summary chapter that answers critical questions about the nature of change and the practice of effective workplace improvement.
PRODUCTIVE WORKPLACES REVISITED

Dignity, Meaning, and Community in the 21st Century

Marvin R. Weisbord
To a New Generation, My Grandchildren
Other Books by Marvin R. Weisbord

Organizational Diagnosis: A Workbook of Theory and Practice
Discovering Common Ground (with thirty-one international authors)
Future Search: An Action Guide (with Sandra Janoff)
Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>About the Author</td>
<td>xv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Introduction: How to Get the Most from <em>Productive Workplaces Revisited</em></td>
<td>xvii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*1.</td>
<td>A Personal Prologue: Discovering Theories X and Y</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part One:</strong> The Search for Productive Workplaces</td>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Scientific Management Revisited: A Tale of Two Taylors</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>The Consulting Engineer: Taylor Invents a New Profession</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Lewin: The Practical Theorist</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>The Learning Organization: Lewin’s Legacy to Management</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>McGregor and the Roots of Organization Development</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td><em>The Human Side of Enterprise Revisited: A New Look at Theories X and Y</em></td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Indicates new chapters or includes updates written for this edition.
Part Two: Transforming Theory into Practice and Practice into Theory 193

*10. Adding Action to Research: Lewin’s Practice Theory Road Map 199

*11. Methods of Diagnosis and Action: Taking Snapshots and Making Movies 213

*12. Rethinking Organizational Improvement: New Perspectives on Consultation 247


*15. Productivity After Taylor: Systems Learning Replaces Expert Analysis 305

Part Three: Learning and Applying New Practice Theories 319


18. Designing Work: Structure and Process for Learning and Self-Control 367

*19. Managing and Consulting Beyond the Design Limits: Changing Everything at Once 393

*20. Future Search: Evolving a Whole Systems Improvement Strategy 427

*21. Improving Whole Systems Worldwide 443
*22. How There and Then Looks from Here and Now: Ten Cases Revisited  457

*Epilogue: Still Caught Between Paradigms: Where Do We Go from Here?  467

References  485

Index  501
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Nobody makes a career of consultation without a considerable boost from others. I received an indispensable lift early on when W. Warner Burke, who hardly knew me, put me on NTL training staffs long years ago. I am fortunate too in having had many fruitful partnerships. I refer to a twenty-plus year consulting practice with Peter Block and Tony Petrella, from whom I learned the business starting in 1971, action research in medical schools and hospitals with Paul Lawrence and Martin Charns from 1971 to 1976, dozens of workshops and consulting projects with Allan Drexler in those same years, an annual NTL Institute Consultation Skills Laboratory with Gail Silverman from 1975 to 1981, the “Men at Work” personal growth laboratories with John Weir and the late
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I also acknowledge a few of many colleagues who have created ingenious ways to get everyone improving in whole systems. These include Richard Axelrod (2000) with The Conference Model®, David Cooperrider (2001) with Appreciative Inquiry, Kathie Dannemiller (1999) with Whole Scale Change®, Barry Oshry (2000) with the Power and Systems Laboratory®, and Harrison Owen (1997) with Open Space Technology. While this book is about my work, not theirs, I have been influenced by all of them over the years. Their methods and many others are described in Billie Alban and Barbara Bunker’s Large Group Interventions (1999), and in Peggy Holman and Tom Devane’s The Change Handbook (2000). That any of us are reducing global uncertainty is arguable. That this journey is worth taking anyway I have no doubt.
Finally, I could not do this work without the love and support of Dorothy Barclay Weisbord, my wife and best friend since 1956. I dedicated the original edition to our fathers, one an entrepreneur, the other a union machinist, both of whom died during the writing of it. At this point in my life I am looking forward, not back, and so dedicate this edition to the next generation, our grandchildren.

M.R.W.
About the Author

Marvin Weisbord is an internationally known consultant and author and co-founder of Future Search Network, involving people worldwide in voluntary social, technological, and economic change. He was for many years a partner in the consulting firm Block Petrella Weisbord and has worked with business firms, government and nonprofit agencies, and medical schools and hospitals. Weisbord serves as a resource faculty member in the Organization and Systems Renewal Program of Antioch University in Seattle and Chicago. He is an elected member of the European Institute for Transnational Studies and of the World Confederation of Productivity Science, and an honorary lifetime member of the Organization Development Network.

Weisbord wrote *Organizational Diagnosis* (Addison-Wesley, 1978), conceived and co-authored *Discovering Common Ground* (Berrett-Koehler, 1992), and is co-author with Sandra Janoff of *Future Search: An Action Guide* (2nd ed.) (Berrett-Koehler, 2000). He also plays piano with the Sunday Jazz Ensemble.
Welcome to Productive Workplaces Revisited. This book is based on a practice theory I devised in the 1980s for improving workplaces in a world of warp speed change. I called it “getting everybody improving whole systems.” To me “improving” meant equal commitment to economic viability and enhanced life values — the dignity, meaning, and community wished for by nearly every living person. I came to that conclusion during twenty-five years of managing and consulting. Along the way I found myself studying my own experiences, rethinking theories and methods I had used, and researching key workplace pioneers. All of this I put into the original Productive Workplaces (Weisbord, 1987).

Processes for involving everyone in improving whole systems have proliferated like wildflowers since 1987. So too have assaults on dignity, meaning, and community. Few jobs are secure as I write in 2003. The march of technology and globalization has been a mixed blessing for those seeking techniques equal to their aspirations. In consequence, the challenges of workplace improvement have never been greater. Nor have aspirations been higher. In recent years many researchers have confirmed the positive bottom-line impact of encouraging leadership at all levels and attending equally the needs of customers, employees, and stockholders (Kotter and Heskett, 1992), of creating and maintaining community by optimizing people ahead of capital (de Geus, 1997), and of focusing on purpose and values before profits as a key to superior market performance (Collins and Porras, 1994). This evidence ought to be
taken seriously by those seeking to reconcile the (illusory) contradiction between honorable ways to make money and the late Philip David Herbst’s (1974) memorable assertion that “the product of work is people.”

**Purpose and Intent**

The purpose of *Productive Workplaces Revisited* is to give you a model, guidelines, and successful methods for improving organizations under conditions of nonstop change. At one level, it will guide you to a deeper understanding of key management practices — and why some work better than others — and conditions for success in complex change projects. More, it is my hope that the book will show that values matter more than techniques and lead you to rethink, appreciate, and learn from your own experience. At bottom, this book summarizes what I have learned from mine.

Back in the 1960s, I was executive vice president of a company in which conflict was so bad that co-workers asked to have a wall built down the middle of a large, open office — a bit of cold war Berlin in North Philadelphia. Into this hostile climate I later introduced self-managing work teams. Few precedents existed, and I had no idea what to expect. In the ensuing confusion, output went down at first. Then it shot up like a rocket — 40 percent — as people caught on to this new way of working. Quality improved to levels our industry considered unattainable.

My biggest surprise, though, was the work force. Organized into teams, workers on both sides of the wall surged with energy and commitment. Antagonists eventually became friends. Absenteeism and turnover went to near zero. People built a community of interest around their own learning and business goals. The psychological wall fell, followed by the real one. “I used to hate coming to work in the morning,” said Anne, a veteran employee who hadn’t smiled in years. “Now I can’t wait. I love it.” That’s when I knew that a productive workplace — based on personal dignity, meaning, and community — was attainable without hoopla or fancy techniques.
Years later I learned to call my project “sociotechnical systems” design, a method for having people plan and control their own work. At the time, lacking any management education beyond Douglas McGregor’s writings, I saw self-managing teams as a way to increase business results by acting on my own values. I believed that autonomy and self-control were good for people and businesses. I did not have a vocabulary then for the connections among dignity, meaning, community, and output in work. This book reflects my efforts to create one.

Just before *Productive Workplaces* appeared in 1987, I took a leave of absence from my consulting company and joined Max Elden, an American professor, at the Norwegian Institute of Technology in Trondheim. After Norway I resumed consulting until 1992. That year, having tired of writing proposals, recruiting project staff, and hassling the details of a small firm with a complex tangle of consulting, training, and materials businesses, I called it quits. I thought of an exchange with my friend Gunnar Hjelholt, the late Danish social scientist, just after he gave up his company in Copenhagen for a 14th Century farmhouse in Jutland. Why did he quit? “Well,” said Gunnar, “I was no longer lying awake at four in the morning worrying about the clients!” After more than twenty years of worrying about the clients and the business, I too felt like letting go. I had no plans other than to step off the consulting merry-go-round.

In 1993, drawing on principles from *Productive Workplaces* Sandra Janoff and I started Future Search Network, an international nonprofit service agency. By 2003 Network members were assisting with effective strategic planning in every sector of society. During a decade of teaching future search to people around the world, I heard a theme repeated time and again. How can anybody be sure the plans people make are actually carried out? How can we build in enduring, constructive norms and processes? If not for life, at least for a long time?

I have pondered that question for many years. I can tell you one popular practice that works badly — external control by those not directly involved. I also can tell you a no-fail practice with great
social and economic benefits: interactive review meetings with “the whole system in the room.” This book covers both polarities. I doubt that anybody can “build in” a technical insurance policy for ongoing success that trumps people’s willingness to keep revisiting worthy goals and to stay connected with each other. The key leadership policy I advocate is involving those who do the work in planning and coordinating the work. The best methods for doing that tend to be simple.

Why then lust after high-performing work systems through increasingly complicated programs? As I pondered that question, I began wondering what had become of the organizations whose case studies form the core of this book. What actually happened afterwards? What could I learn about turbulence, transformation, stability, follow-up, and continuity by seeking out clients I’d known years back and tracing the lives of organizations I once had sought to make more productive? With 20/20 hindsight and fifteen to thirty years of emotional distance, could I discern patterns now that weren’t apparent then?

Productive Workplaces Revisited is the result. This work contains nearly all the text of the first edition plus one hundred pages of new material. Revisiting my earlier work stimulated in me stories, ideas, and tips that did not come up the first time around. Hence the new title.

Who Should Read This Book?

In 1987, I said that I wanted to influence three audiences: managers, consultants, and students and teachers. They are still the main groups this book speaks to.

To managers I suggest that the concept of productive workplaces makes a powerful focus for organizing work — toward purposes, strategies, and structures worthy of human aspiration, cooperation, and sweat. Managing that ideal opens the door — as I will show — to quality and output far beyond what most companies settle for now.
To consultants of every specialty I suggest that we are in the midst of a revolutionary “rethink” of expertise — what it means, what it’s good for, and how to use it. Treating every consulting engagement as a potential step toward or away from whole-system improvement is to perform a service desperately needed. Whether or not clients explicitly request this, it can be delivered in response to any request.

To students and teachers I suggest that no further research is needed to prove the efficacy of participation in democratic societies. There are no technical alternatives to personal responsibility and cooperation in the workplace. What’s needed are more people who will stick their necks out. That means learning as much about ourselves — our impulses, noble and ignoble — as we learn about other major subjects. Theories X and Y are not abstractions invented by Douglas McGregor. They are the parts of us that shape our actions, making of work an adventure and a trial. A “whole system” includes economics, technology, and people — including all of ourselves. I urge students to see the workplace as a “whole brain” adventure involving values, thought, and action. In 1987 I wrote that I would like to see that notion in more academic curricula. In 2003 I am glad to report that I do.

People who might particularly benefit from this new edition include:

- Anyone stimulated by the prospect of creating workplaces that offer economic success and satisfying work;
- Managers and consultants curious about what I have learned from more than a decade of community and network development based on principles gleaned from projects in businesses and medical schools;
- People looking for perspectives on helping large, diverse groups work productively;
- Past readers of Productive Workplaces who wonder what happened to the organizations I wrote about in 1987;
• Some of the thousands of people who have attended workshops with me and, more likely, with me and Sandra Janoff, since 1987, and the hundreds of members of Future Search Network, who will find their commitments validated here;
• Graduate student cohorts in the Organization and Systems Renewal Program at Antioch-Seattle and Antioch-Chicago, and in the Benedictine University doctoral program who have heard many of these stories since the mid-80s and always asked for more, and their peers in dozens of colleges and universities using Productive Workplaces as a text; and
• Readers over the years who have asked me to sign well-thumbed, annotated copies of Productive Workplaces. I have received a great deal of job satisfaction from meeting them. They remind me of my life-changing encounter with Douglas McGregor’s Human Side of Enterprise in 1966 (see Chapter One). That uniquely was the fork in the road that enabled me decades later to write this book.

Three Major Themes

This book has three themes woven into a counterpoint of history, case studies, criticism, and new guidelines for action. My major theme is that we hunger for community in the workplace and are a great deal more productive when we find it. To feed this hunger in ways that preserve democratic values of individual dignity, opportunity for all, and mutual support is to harness energy and productivity beyond imagining.

My second theme is that the world is changing too fast for experts, and old-fashioned “problem solving” no longer works. For more than forty years productive workplaces on several continents have been evolving entirely another way of thinking and acting. First, they have been moving away from problem solving toward whole-systems improvement as the secret for solving great handfuls of problems at once. Second, they have been moving away from
getting experts to fix systems toward having experts join everybody else in learning how to make improvements. The chart “Learning Curve,” which appears in Chapter 13 illustrates this evolution.

My third theme represents a fresh interpretation of Douglas McGregor’s famous dichotomy between Theory X and Theory Y. I believe that these polarities actually represent an inner dialogue between parent and child, hard guy and soft guy, decisive self and passive self within each of us. Managing this dialogue — not techniques, strategies, or models — represents our main dilemma in building more productive workplaces. In his classic management book, *The Human Side of Enterprise*, McGregor classified these opposing voices as theories of human nature, one (X) grounded in assumptions of laziness and incompetence, the other (Y) in assumptions of self-motivation, achievement, and growth. After 100 projects in every imaginable kind of workplace, the only thing I know for sure that I have changed is my own mind about Theories X and Y. They do not describe people with opposing management styles. They describe an inner dialogue within me and within you. This X/Y dialogue energizes our murkier as well as our more enlightened selves, making the search for productive workplaces a risky voyage into the hidden reaches of our own psyches. Changing our workplaces is inevitably bound up with changing ourselves.

These themes mark my journey down a path as old as the Industrial Revolution. Elton Mayo (1945), founder of industrial human relations, noted decades ago how “science and industry put an end to the individual’s feeling of identification with his group, of satisfaction in his work” (p. 6). But engineers had noticed the effects of alienation — accidents, low morale, low output — more than half a century before that. I write now as a practitioner committed to involving people in restructuring their own companies, reorganizing and redesigning their own work. I see myself on a road with no end leading toward management practices grounded in dignity, meaning, and community, central to economic success, and also responsive to a sea tide of unprecedented change.
Overview of the Contents

Part One. In Part One I elaborate my first theme — that deep human strivings underlie the search for productive workplaces. Every variety of scientist has pursued that ideal, yet none has ever captured it by purely technical means. I retell stories from management history to support my contention that no good alternatives exist today for employee involvement in reorganizing companies. I offer new interpretations of how the first consulting engineer, Frederick W. Taylor, and four social scientists, Douglas McGregor, Kurt Lewin, Fred Emery, and Eric Trist, translated values into action and on why their innovations are important today.

Chapters in this part explore how Frederick Taylor’s “scientific management” lost credibility because it metamorphosed into engineering solutions for what Taylor himself considered people problems. Organization development, a social science of managing change derived from Kurt Lewin, has suffered a similar fate whenever its advocates based solutions on feelings, human relations, or participation unconnected to markets and technology. Likewise, descendants of Emery and Trist — enamored of sociotechnical methods — sometimes lost sight of human processes, feelings, and group skills even as they designed work systems tied to customer needs and technical flexibility. I also show how practitioners of all three traditions have experienced enormous dilemmas in learning to use scientific knowledge while seeking to preserve democratic values and dialogue.

Part Two. Here I take up the practice of management and consultation based on participative methods. I present six cases in which my colleagues and I helped to diagnose and resolve commonplace managerial dilemmas — employee turnover, costs, production, staff-line cooperation — in the 1970s and early 1980s. I then critique this practice against a backdrop of accelerating change. It is here that my second theme — the inadequacy of “expert” management and consulting methods for coping with fast
change — takes over. Through these cases I illustrate an evolution of practice from participative problem solving toward whole-systems improvement.

**Part Three.** The last part starts with a “21st Century practice theory” for managing and consulting now in this new century. It follows from the action steps, values, and thoughts evolved by my five main protagonists, and from the six cases. It is based on simple criteria for assessing the potential for improvement — leadership, a business opportunity, and energized people. I propose three general guidelines for high-risk projects: getting the whole system in the room, focusing on the future, and helping people do it themselves.

I also describe three methods by which my proposed orientations can be applied — the future search conference, team development, and participative work design. Anyone who believes in the value of productive workplaces will find it useful to hone his or her skills in these modes. Finally, I illustrate all the modes in action during an intense year in the life of a company that saved itself from disaster with employment guarantees and employee involvement. This case brings together my themes in one composition. It also leaves me with melodic fragments and unresolved chords that appear in the Epilogue.

**Basic Values, Simple Methods**

In the first edition I described two methods I found promising for involving everyone in improving whole systems — future search and participative work design. I also noted one, team development, that ought to be in everybody’s tool kit. Of these core methods, I have worked only with future search since the early 1990s. So I will not be adding to the technology tool kit this time around. I stand by what I wrote on team building and work redesign. Had I newer examples, I would use them to espouse the same principles and practices. Future search, on the other hand, has been my personal cutting edge for more than twenty years. I consider it my learning
laboratory for group-based processes, applicable to most social, technological, and economic dilemmas today. Therefore I devote two comprehensive new chapters to what I have learned from future searching.

Everything I know how to do now grew out of the values, cases, methods, and theories I advocated in 1987. If you are a first-time reader, you will find here a chronicle of the way I and many others practiced organizational change in the latter part of the 20th Century, laying the groundwork for most if not all large-scale participatory methods now in use. My stories were told to illustrate principles and values derived from innovative experiments during and after World War II. If you understand these, you should have no trouble finding appropriate methods for today. The principles for effective workplace improvement, I think, have a timeless quality, independent of the relentless disco beat of technology.

I believe that “getting everybody improving whole systems” remains a worthwhile and elusive purpose if you care about worthy workplaces. Embedded in this prescription are values of ongoing inquiry and widening inclusion. The hard part, in a world of infinite choices, is using techniques equal to our values. Many more methods exist now for involving everyone in the whole than existed in 1987. I have updated the bibliography to include some of them.

You can sail this sea of possibility to uncharted new worlds. You also can drown in it. I can tell you with the confidence born of forty years of chasing rainbows to the far horizon that you will not be able to absorb, let alone use, the proliferating workplace change library. Let go the attractive myth that you will one day learn to choose from the myriad exactly the right process each time. Every method has in it a lifetime of somebody’s experience. By the time you master one new trick, people the world over have devised a dozen more. Fortunately, you only need a few good methods to grow on. Seek out the ones that excite you. Then look for places where people resonate to what you know how to do.
Second Edition Highlights

This edition contains much new material. I have traced my personal cases forward from 1987, bringing all of them up-to-date. I visited, for example, the company that now owns the family business where I learned my trade (see Chapter One). There I saw first-hand what the self-managing work teams of 1966 had metamorphosed into in the computer age. I also researched what happened to AECL Medical Products in the years following the detailed account that appeared here in 1987 in what is now Chapter Nineteen.

I also followed up on the six cases that originally appeared in Part Two. These were the basis for my “learning curve,” the evolution of practices for effective workplace improvement during the last century. In this edition you will gain for each case — “Packaging Plant,” “Food Services,” “Chem Corp,” “Medical School,” “Printing Inc.,” and “Solcorp” — some insight into what came after and implications for today’s workplaces.

I also have put in two new tales from earlier times that seem more relevant now with the benefit of hindsight. New Chapter Fourteen, for example, has to do with my work in medical schools in the 1970s. In it I tell how I learned that “training” for medical professionals could be an effective change strategy if done as action research into what people thought would help, rather than as medicine prescribed for organizational malaise. That chapter, useful to anyone concerned with training and/or medical systems, contains ideas for bypassing resistance where it is most likely to be evoked.

New Chapter Fifteen tells a story from Bethlehem Steel that I touched on briefly in 1987 and have fleshed out to include lessons for today. It describes in detail how I learned to get “the whole system in the room” and what the immediate benefits might be. I also have expanded the chapter, once titled “Inventing the Future,” into two chapters that reflect my work and concerns of recent years. In Chapters Twenty and Twenty-One you will learn how
“future search,” an action strategy for involving everyone in improving the whole, came to be used by people on five continents. I also speculate on why this particular method has crossed so many cultural boundaries. Anyone concerned with organizing effective large group meetings in a shrinking world bursting with diversity and fragmentation may benefit from retracing some of the steps I took down that endless road in the last thirty years.

Finally, in Chapter Twenty-Two I sum up what I learned from my cases. Productive Workplaces Revisited illustrates something you knew all along and might rather leave unsaid. For every great “cultural change” process destined to last awhile, another will disappear into the void. No one can predict which is which. It doesn’t matter how good a leader or consultant you are or how worthy your methods. Like October maple leaves, this season’s colorful display will be swept away by a change of owners, new management, a merger, downsizing, market shift, or when the first whiff of the next new thing overwhelms the aftertaste of the last one. If an organization survives, expect a new leafy canopy next year. That is not a problem to be solved. It is a reality to appreciate and live with.

For me the big “take-away” from my revisit to territory I left long ago blends my pessimism about continuity with faith in doing the right things anyway. We need worthy goals to keep going. Whether we can sustain them under conditions of non-stop change remains iffy and unknowable. I think that too much energy goes into fantasizing methods that “guarantee” follow-through, continuity, and that astonishing oxymoron, “sustainable change.” We had better spend time doing the best we know how in this meeting. We might do better if we could recognize people committing to useful action right now as a stand-in for the elusive follow-up so eagerly chased after.

Thus, a keynote for this new edition:

Anything we do today to enhance dignity, meaning, and community right now while seeking to make workplaces more productive is existentially valuable regardless of how long it remains in use or what people do afterwards.