The Future of Workplaces

Scan Club output for April 2022

Employment and Social Development Canada
Emploi et Développement social Canada

Canada

In April 2022, the Human Resources Innovation Foresight Team (“HRI”) hosted its monthly Scan Club on “The Future of Workplaces”. Participants from across the Government of Canada participated in the hour and a half activity. HRI provided participants with three specific “Weak Signals”:

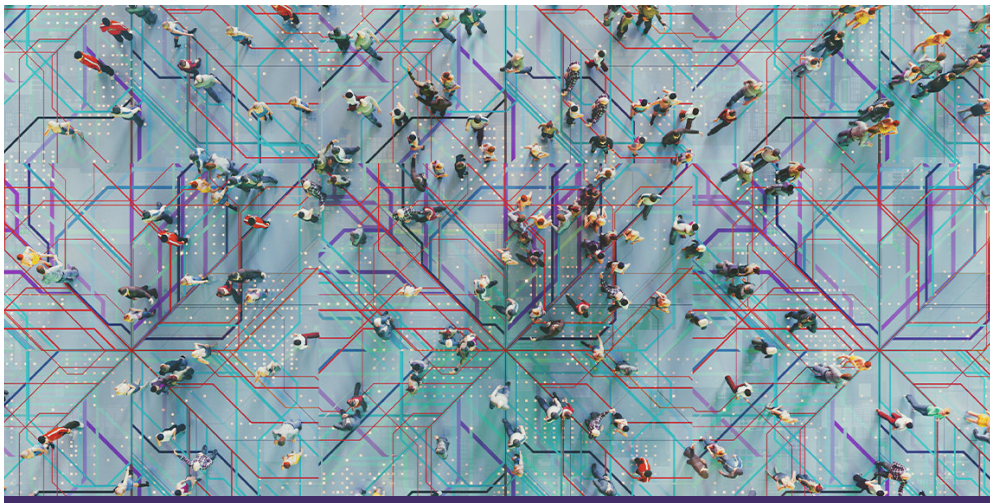
- How the metaverse could change work
- Northeast Ohio non-profits create new online tool providing racial equity scores for regional job sites
- Women Don’t Feel Included in the Workplace – But Neither Does Anyone Else!

Participants then discussed the importance of these signals and their potential impact on the Federal Public Service. The following infographics summarize each Weak Signal and organizes the participant’s’ insights and discussions into various areas of implications using a STEEPV framework.

Visit HRI at:

GC-wiki: https://wiki.gccollab.ca/EDSC_Innovation_RH_-_HR_Innovation_ESDC

GC-collab: https://gccollab.ca/groups/profile/928221/esdchuman-resources-innovation-innovation-en-ressourceshumaines-de-edsc



How the metaverse could change work

Technology titans and gaming giants such as Meta, Microsoft, Epic Games, and Roblox are creating their own virtual worlds or “metaverses”. The metaverse draws on a vast ensemble of different technologies, including virtual reality platforms, gaming, machine learning, blockchain, 3-D graphics, digital currencies, sensors, and (in some cases) VR-enabled headsets. Rapid progress is taking place in computer-generated holography that dispenses with the need for headsets, either by using virtual viewing windows that create holographic displays from computer images, or by deploying specially designed holographic pods to project people and images into actual space. Companies such as Meta are also pioneering haptic (touch) gloves that enable users to interact with 3-D virtual objects and experience sensations such as movement, texture, and pressure.

The metaverse has the potential to drastically change the way we work. Immersive training can enhance skill development and upskilling efforts. Data-backed technologies can enable immediate feedback systems. It will also reimagine the office environment simultaneously reengaging remote workers who might feel alienated and dismissing many of the prejudices and unconscious biases plaguing physical workplace environments.

Impacted groups:

- Everyone!
- Employers
- Rural communities
- Remote workers
- People with disabilities
- People with different gender identities or expressions
- Racialized groups of people
- Marginalized groups of people

So what?
How might this impact us in the future?

Social + Cultural

- **Avatar Debates:** Anonymity in the virtual reality setting comes as a double-edged sword in the workplace. As noted, it immediately eliminates many prejudices and biases perpetuated in a physical office setting by enabling individuals to hide their preferred individual identifiers. Power dynamics, too, (managers with better offices or differently dressed or physically imposing) no longer play as influential a role. Alternatively, a lack of physical cues, physical identifiers, body language, and the anonymity of a random avatar could hinder collegial relations and dynamics.

- **New Social-Pscyho Orders:** Like any new medium, discovering, experiencing, and regulating virtual reality's social and professional spaces will be difficult. Traditional – not always good, not always bad – social dynamics might be overhauled for something entirely new and unanticipated. For individuals, an avatar free of physical representations might engender identity confusion, identity transformation, or identity empowerment. Avatar stratification or prejudices may develop over time (i.e. the person who chooses an animal versus a person who chooses an accurate depiction of themselves). While such implications and their subsequent order of implications would be much further down the line, they are a consequence of creating a "new world" - workplace or not.

- **New Ways of Learning:** Onboarding, training, and professional development can utilize virtual reality to provide multi-modal, interactive learning models. In turn, resources and staff committed to this type of work would no longer fall to a traditional manager or human resources advisor but to IT and service designers creating and designing the models.

Technological + Infrastructural

- **No More Buildings:** A virtual workforce no longer requires office buildings, services and logistics administering the buildings, etc. redirecting funds, resources, and land for other purposes.

Values + Ethics

- **Resource Consumption:** The digital space versus a physical one. While real property and the resources

required to maintain it and commute to it are no longer needed, creating an online world requires huge amounts of energy and resources to support the needed infrastructure.

Policy + Government

- **Thinking [Inter] Nationally:** Virtual Reality, theoretically, does away with regional and national boundaries. There is less of a need for geo-codes or regional employee designations when most people work in a “professionalverse”. Recruitment and hiring, then, can extend beyond regions and, perhaps, beyond Canada. Virtual worlds shift our mental models of countries as unique entities.
  What would be the difference if Canada and the United Kingdom suddenly amalgamated public services (both already administer many, distinct groups of people across different regions)? VR eases that collaboration. Now ESDC looks after British communities while the UK’s National Health Services administers health services to Canadians, for example.

Northeast Ohio non-profits create new online tool providing racial equity scores for regional job sites

Team NEO and the Fund for Our Economic Future recently launched the “ESG to the Power of Place” tool. Employers, economic developers, and municipalities can use the new digital tool to measure the skillset and diversity of communities within a 30-minute commute by car, transit, bike, or walk of a business.

It can also be used by individuals to analyze the impact a factory, warehouse, or office has on a particular environmental and community – including the cost and impact of commuting. Users can compare up to five different locations by entering addresses into the tool enabling them to compare different businesses in relation to their values and interests.

Impacted groups:

- Racialized groups of people
- Marginalized groups of people
- Smaller communities
- Lower income communities
- Isolated communities (ineffective transit)
- Smaller businesses
- Businesses/Employers wanting to promote progressive values
- People with families
- People with mobility and/or transportation challenges

So what?
How might this impact us in the future?

Social + Cultural

- **Filling the Voids:** Companies can find opportunities to create new spaces where a particular type of workforce is available or where it is more affordable without forgoing access to a work or labour force. Municipalities

can locate communities that need greater economic development or that are missing types of businesses, services, industries (i.e. neighbourhoods without access to banks or grocery stores). Individuals can find businesses that operate within their community and that, possibly, align with their own values and standards.

- **Combatting Exclusion:** Businesses often seek cities' financial centres – a prohibitively expensive area and surrounding area to live. As a result, people living in neighbourhoods further outside of the city – often where lower income and non-white communities live – have less access to better-paying jobs or are forced to commute further and longer, burdening certain groups of people more than others.

Technological + Infrastructural

- **Data Does It:** Utilizing data-driven tools helps start-ups and local businesses find opportune areas to set up shop. It also enables communities to target specific industries and sectors to encourage progressive economic development. Professionals from afar and or nearby can make the best decision for them and their needs based on more accurate depictions of their employers. Forcing businesses to report on certain values – equity, sustainability, social governance, etc. - creates a feedback loop: professionals seek those employers with high scores, to remain competitive, more employers will have to prove their commitment to those goals to raise their own score.

Values + Ethics

- **Incentivize the Right Way:** Businesses can earn higher scores by adhering to progressive environmental, social, ethical, and economic values important to communities (i.e. diversity hiring practices). Municipalities can incentivize businesses by providing descriptive details on a community's viability and, conversely, obligate businesses to mee a certain progressive standard if they want to operate in that area.

- **Ethical Consumerism:** Consumers can look at the scores of local businesses and shop according to those that adhere to their own values.

Women Don’t Feel Included in the Workplace – But Neither Does Anyone Else!

A recent Bain & Company study surveyed 10,000 individuals to determine their sense of inclusion within the workplace and revealed that 75% of the women surveyed reported feeling excluded in. Women, minority, and marginalized groups - whether it be by gender identity, ethnicity, race, religion, age, or values – are experiencing a sub-optimal sense of value and involvement within the workplace. However, fewer than 30% of all employees surveyed felt fully included regardless of identity.

Additionally, the survey found that respondents in a more inclusive organization are much more likely to feel free to innovate and to feel comfortable challenging the status quo, equating organizational success with individual confidence.

Impacted groups:

- People with disabilities
- People with different gender identities or expressions
- Racialized groups of people
- Marginalized groups of people
- Managers
- Generations Millennial, Z, Alpha
- HR industry

So what? How might this impact us in the future?

Social + Cultural

- **Intersectionality Investigation:** Companies are learning to look at specific groups of women and other groups of people through an additional intersectional

lens, considering other factors such as race or ethnicity, gender, geography, and tenure or place in the organization and determining their barriers and unique situations.

- **What's it all for?:** As worker retention falters and labour forces diminish, organizations may face a reckoning with how employees are paid, honoured, and treated in the workforce. The fundamental existence of "employee" in relation to the employer and the organization is hierarchical in nature and, often, translates to imbalanced power dynamics. Employees with the confidence or ability to say "no more" might look elsewhere, lending an upper hand to employers that, prior, struggled to compete for talent (i.e. public sector, NGOs, B-corps).

Technological + Infrastructural

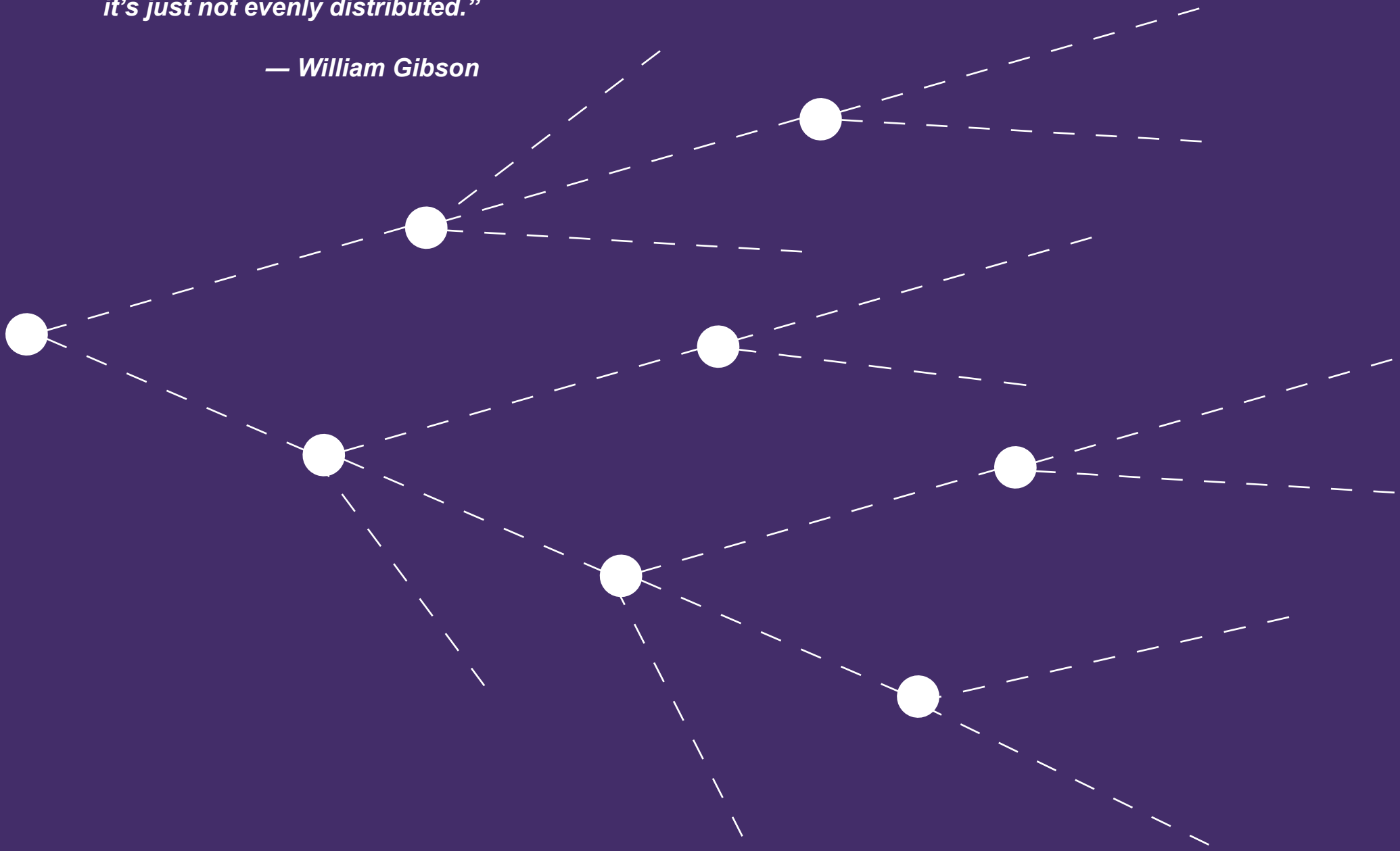
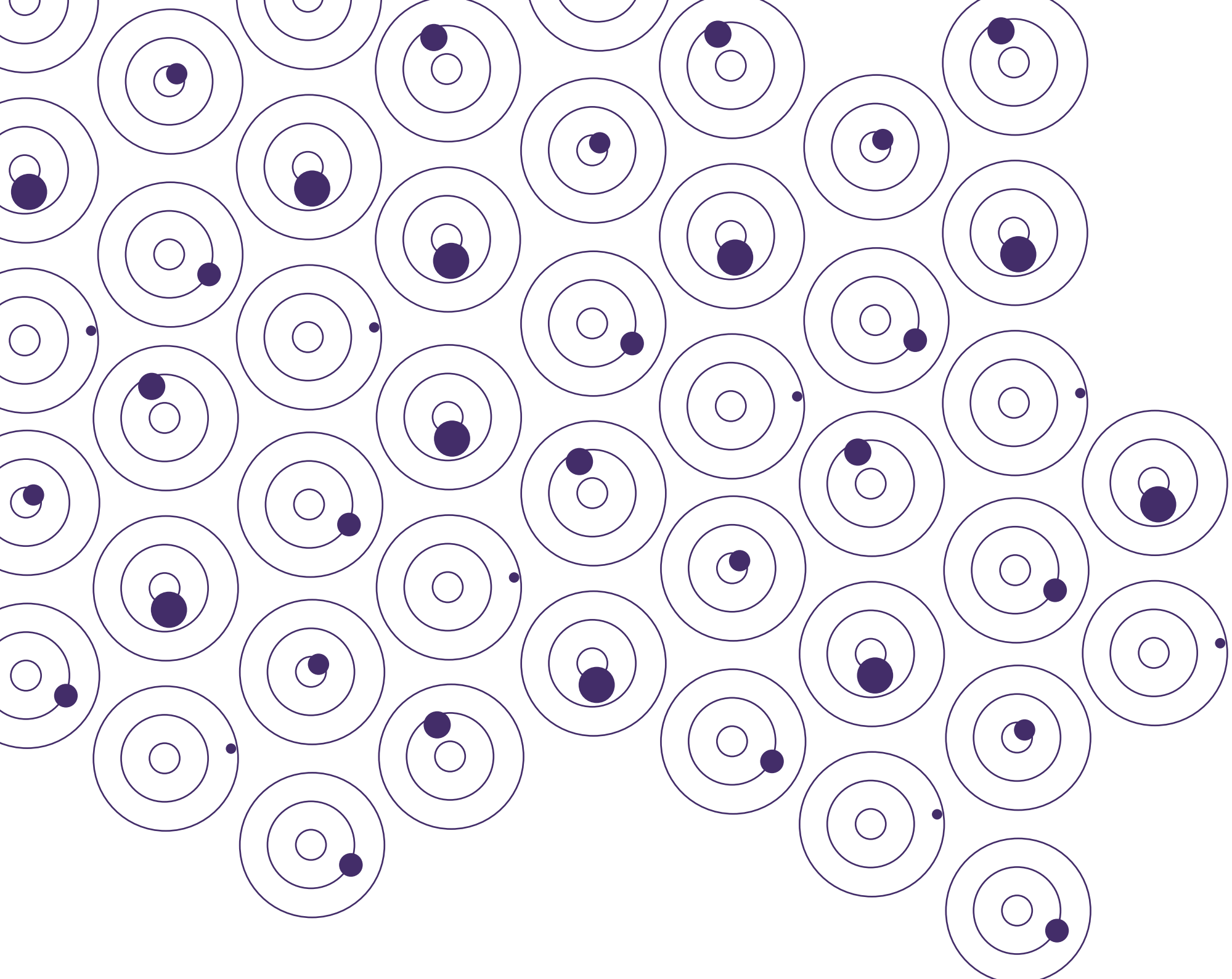
- **Remote Working Helps?:** Remote-working provides people who feel discriminated against, are plagued by microaggressions, or who are quiet in larger, physical settings a safer space working from home. Conversely, it can also reinforce a growing sense of exclusion by having to work in isolation and more easily being excluded from online meetings.

Assumption: More people and more visibility results in more inclusion.

Values + Ethics

- **Value Systems:** Employees' feelings of inclusion and self-worth are perhaps a result of feeling they can express themselves more openly or because they feel more entitled than prior generations – particularly, as pay stagnates and benefits dwindle. Organizations may need to reconsider their operational structures and dig deeper philosophically when it comes to their fundamental existence and the relationship with an employee – looking at ways to share knowledge, build teams, stay healthy, and lead people in accordance with employees' desires.

- **Balancing Future Values:** As technological advancements and organizational transformations continue there is a greater potential for organizations to unbind their traditional structural dynamics – decision-making apparatuses and hierarchical mechanisms - and look to incorporate or reconcile individual values with organizational cultural ones (i.e Zoom being a simple, revolutionary application).

“The future is already here –
it’s just not evenly distributed.”

— William Gibson