In A New Era of Work, Skills are Lost In Translation
By John Boudreau
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Lead: New ways of working will require a common language of work, just like the common language of accounting and finance.

"What we've got here is a failure to communicate," is the classic line from the movie *Cool Hand Luke*, where Paul Newman describes being surrounded in a church, and about to be shot. A failure to communicate about the work people do may not be as dramatic, but it is an increasingly important barrier to achieving your organization's mission.

Suppose organizations adopted their unique definitions of sales, cash and depreciation? They could probably make reasonable decisions about money inside their organizations, but financial markets would refuse to trade in those companies, and financial institutions could not move money between them. The common language of accounting transcends this failure to communicate and allows money to move beyond organizational boundaries.

[Work and workers are also moving beyond organizational boundaries, and beyond employment.](#) Your organization will increasingly use workers that move quickly from one organization to another, or that never join an organization at all. Siemens borrows Disney employees to market its hearing aid for children. Apprio and Tongal supply hundreds of thousands of freelance workers on thousands of projects ranging from logo design, to software application development, to documentary production. None of those workers become employees of the organizations that engage them. How do you know what you're getting when the workers you engage are not assigned to jobs you know well with skills that your organization has defined and tracked throughout their careers? Just as institutions can't "trade" money without a common language, so they can't easily trade workers without a common language. Workers can't move efficiently between projects and organizations, or even between positions within one organization, when the language of work is imprecise or incompatible.

Organizations from Walmart to Starbucks to the U.S. Government wish to hire military veterans. Yet, the military language of work doesn't map well onto private-sector jobs.

For example, the [DOL provides a "crosswalk"](#) to translate between military MOS and civilian. Search the word "analyst" in the Air Force and you get a long list of "interpreters and translators." Search the word "leader" and you get a list of jobs called "architectural and engineering managers." A web enabled "[crosswalk](#)" allows civilian Federal hiring managers to see a list of military occupations that are related to civilian job families. If you choose the job family of "Accounting and Budgeting Group" and the "Occupational Series" called "Auditing" you get matching military jobs such as Comptroller and Yoeman. The job description for the Coast Guard "Yoeman" is "Counselor and source of information to personnel--on questions ranging from career moves, entitlements and incentive programs to retirement options and veteran's benefits." The job description for the Navy Yoeman is "Perform clerical and administrative duties, including typing and filing; prepare and route correspondence and reports; maintain records, publications, and service records; counsel officer personnel on administrative matters; perform administrative support for shipboard legal proceedings and maintain shipboard legal files; conduct reporting/detaching, and required retention related interviews; and serve as office managers." Not only are the two descriptions very different across the two military branches, their language is unlikely to provide enough insight into whether they can do a civilian auditing job.

These job descriptions work well within one military branch, but they are less useful for communicating about work across military branches, let alone between the military and the civilian sectors.

In "Beyond Employment," my colleagues Ravin Jesuthasan, David Creelman and I describe how solutions are evolving. Freelance platforms for computer coders and advertising designers restrict themselves only to projects that have a very clear and tangible deliverable (an application or a web ad) that can be judged for its quality, independent of the skills and other attributes of the person that produced it. Yet, even with tangible results, worker attributes matter. Uber or Lyft provide a very tangible transport from one place to another, and you don't pay until you get there, but customers still count on the idea that the drivers are licensed and have basic driving skills and service standards. How do they know? There are driver ratings, but they are at best a rough guide to driver qualifications.

When organizations borrow talent, as Siemens did when it allied with Disney employees to market its children's hearing aid, they rely largely on the partner organization's language of their workers' qualifications and capabilities. When you get workers from an agency or consulting firm, you rely on their language to describe what the workers can do. Often, these organizations have very different language for the same work, just like the different military branches.

There is change afoot. IBM's Global Workforce Initiative aspired to have talent move freely across global units and between projects. That required IBM's global leaders adopt a common skill taxonomy to describe the work, so that one region didn't define things like "project manager" differently from others. IBM required all their units to adopt the same common language based on about 100 "roles". IBM then required all of its external talent suppliers to adopt the same language, to better connect the external supply to IBM's internal supply. The greater clarity about what work IBM needed and what its suppliers provided saved millions of dollars through better pricing of external talent. IBM and Kenexa have turned this into a solution they offer to create a Smarter Workforce.

So, this is no trivial administrative issue. If you fail to develop an adequate language for work, you'll overspend or miss opportunities to optimize getting work done with workers beyond your boundaries.

Some organizations have adopted LinkedIn profiles as their record of employee experience and capability, noting that employees are far more motivated to keep their LinkedIn profiles up to date, than to update profiles on an internal system that only works in one organization. Organizations such as TalentSky propose to take this to the next level, allowing workers to describe their careers as stories on a platform with a common library that translates those stories into work requirements for hiring organizations.

Policy debates about reducing global unemployment and skill shortages often focus on creating more "good jobs. Yet, a significant solution may be to create "good work" that lies beyond jobs. That requires workers' credentials be transportable. A 2014 report on the "Future of Youth Employment" lists "alternative credentialing" as a requirement for the future, and recommends "A new organization should be formed and tasked with aggregating and evaluating credentialing platforms in a modern, decentralized way."

Are LinkedIn, IBM, and the U.S. Department of labor building early versions of a professional audit organization for work? One that may soon resemble audit organizations in accounting or finance?

The Rosetta Stone of work is far from reality, but there are signs that it is evolving, just as a common language of accounting and finance evolved. If your work is trapped in a language that only makes sense for your own jobs, should you be exploring how to extend it beyond employment?

John Boudreau is professor and research director at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business and Center for Effective Organizations, and author of the forthcoming book, "Beyond Employment" with Ravin Jesuthasan and David Creelman.

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