S M A R T

Work Design: A Deep Dive

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Smartworkdesign.com.au
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Qwida.org.au

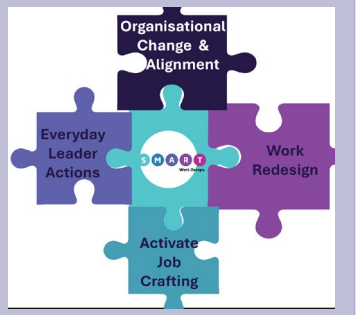
Plan



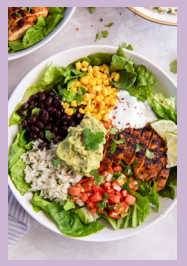
Mental health, work Design & the SMART model



Coffee



Smart Change Strategies



Lunch



AI and Work Design

Hannah Ross
04 November 2026 · News

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT | WELLBEING | CULTURE | PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Job satisfaction falls to lowest level in a decade, survey suggests



British Social Attitudes Survey

[HR Magazine - Job satisfaction falls to lowest level in a decade, survey suggests - HR Magazine]

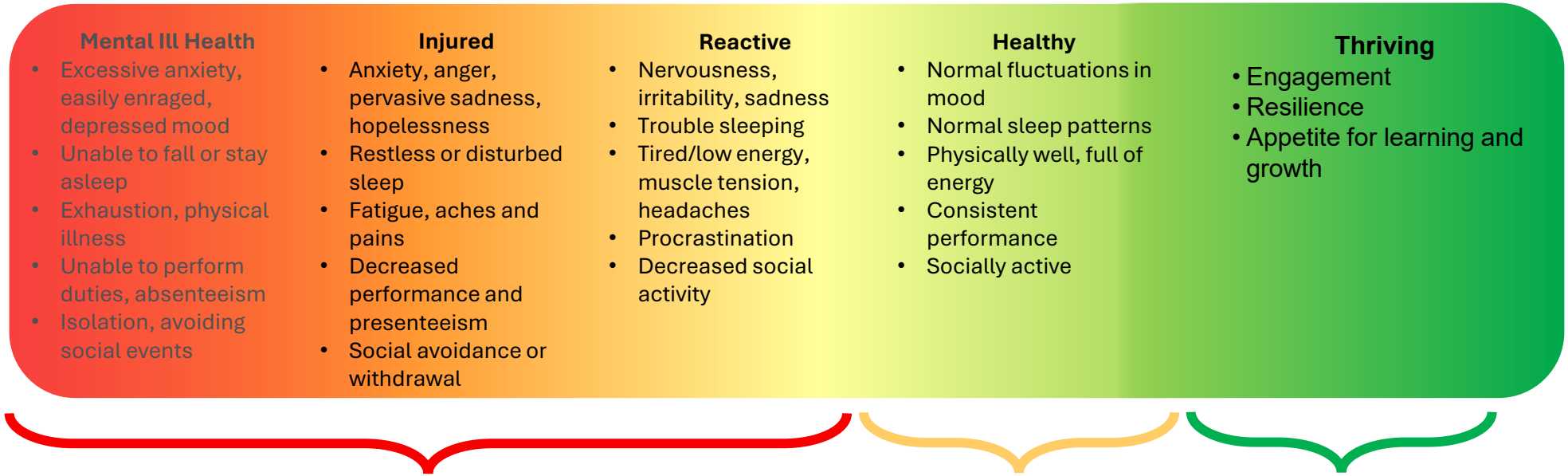
Burnout Report 2026: High stress pushing workers into sick leave as just one in four feel mental health is genuinely prioritised and supported in the workplace

POSTED 16TH JANUARY 2026

https://mentalhealth-uk.org/

Mental health isn't just ill health

"A state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community" (World Health Organisation)



Trainee doctors in UK facing higher risk of burnout than during pandemic



Recommendations:
National policy on resident wellness should (1) ***increase awareness of the stress of residency*** *and* ***destigmatize depression*** *in trainees; (2) develop systems to i****dentify and treat depression in trainees in a confidential way*** *to reduce barriers to accessing help*

Mitigate Illness

Monitor, accommodate, and treat illness, ill-health and injury.

Douglass, L. M., & North, A. C. (2018). Resident Physician Burnout: Improving the Wellness of Surgical Trainees. In *Surgeons as Educators* (pp. 489-498). Springer, Cham.

The Fence or the Ambulance

JOHN N. HURTY, M.D.

'Twas a dangerous cliff, as they freely confessed,
Though to walk near its crest was so pleasant.
But over its terrible edge there had slipped
A duke and full many a peasant.
So the people said something would have to be done,
But their projects did not at all tally,
Some said, ' Put a fence 'round the edge of the cliff ';
Some, ' An ambulance down in the valley.'

But the cry for the ambulance carried the day,
For it spread through the neighboring city;
A fence may be useful or not, it is true,
But each heart was brim full of pity
For those who slipped over that dangerous cliff;
And the dwellers in highway and valley
Gave pound or gave pence, not to put up a fence,
But an ambulance down in the valley.

' For the cliff is all right if you're careful,' they said,
' And if folks even slip or are dropping,
It isn't the slipping that hurts them so much
As the shock down below when they're stopping.'
Then an old sage remarked, ' It's a marvel to me
That people give far more attention
To repairing results than to stopping the cause,
When they'd much better aim at prevention.

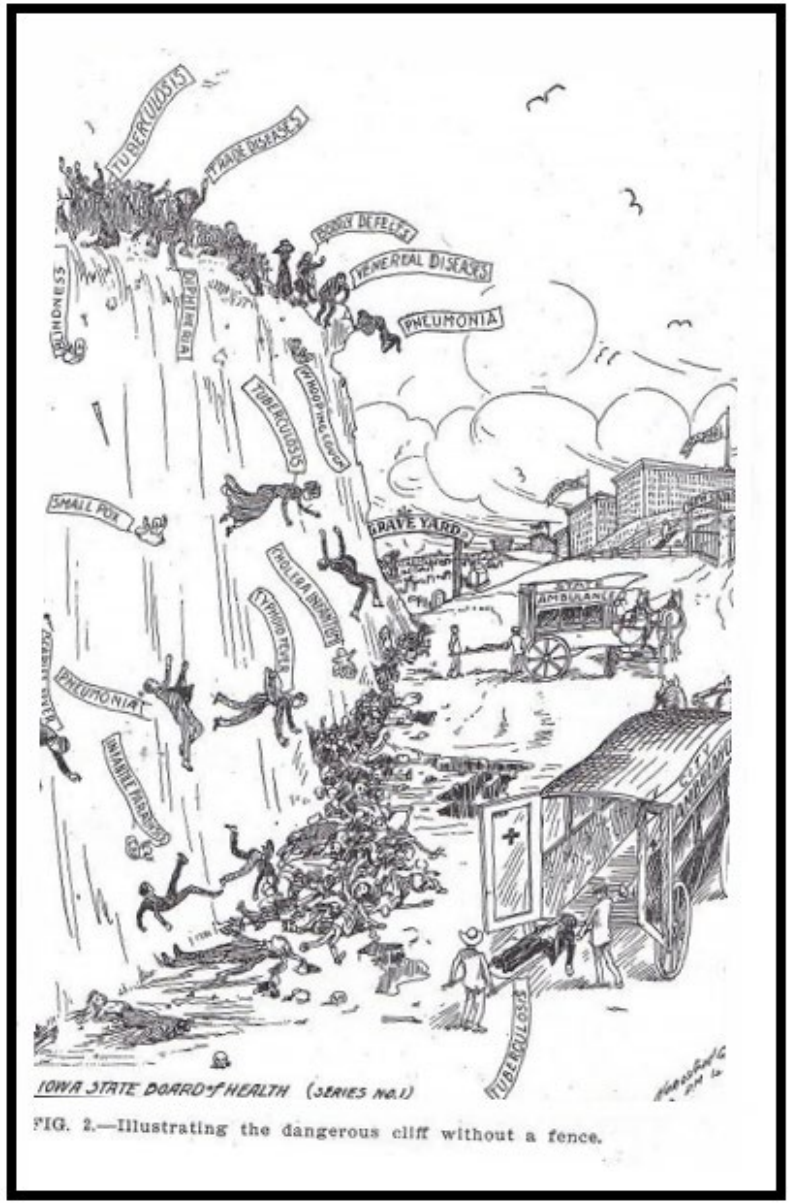
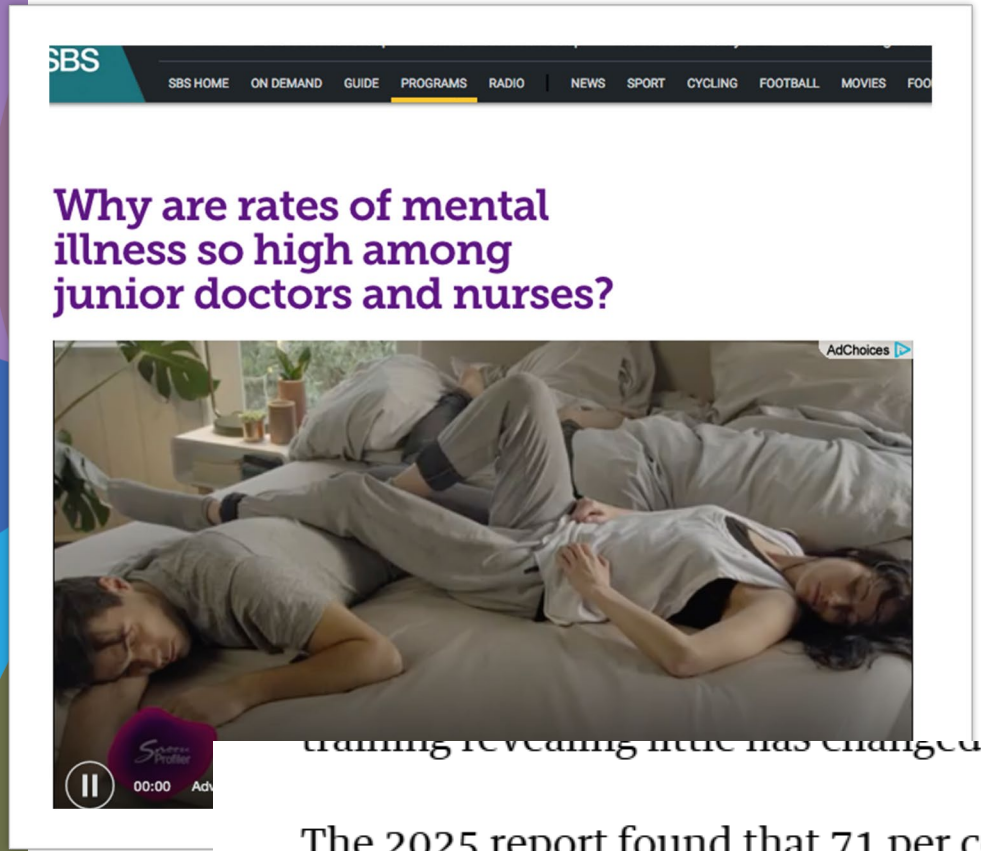


FIG. 2.—Illustrating the dangerous cliff without a fence.

' Let us stop at its source all this mischief,' cried he,
' Come, neighbors and friends, let us rally,
If the cliff we will fence we might almost dispense
With the ambulance down in the valley.'
' Oh, he's a fanatic,' the others rejoined.
' Dispense with the ambulance? Never!
He'd dispense with all charities, too, if he could;
But no! We'll protect them forever;
Aren't we picking folks up just as fast as they fall?
And shall this man dictate to us? Shall he?
Why should people of sense stop to put up a fence
While their ambulance works in the valley? '

But a sensible few who were practical, too,
Will not bear with such nonsense much longer,
They believe that prevention is better than cure
And their party will soon be the stronger.
Encourage them, then, with your purse, voice and pen,
And (while other philanthropists dally)
They will scorn all pretense and put up a stout fence
On the cliff that hangs over the valley.





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training revealing little has changed since 2024.

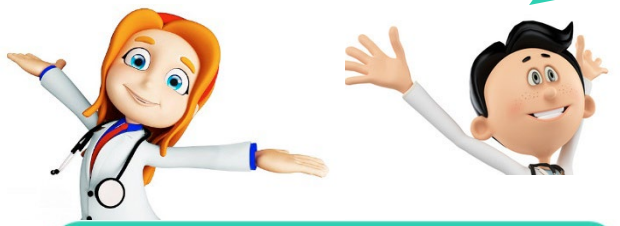
The 2025 report found that 71 per cent of junior doctors in the WACHS work beyond their rostered hours several times a week, while only 39 per cent claimed their unrostered overtime pay, a number which has dramatically decreased from 55 per cent in 2023.

"This is the daily reality …

gruelling 16-hour shifts on top of an already overwhelming study load, social isolation, the constant crippling pressure of exams and the fear of humiliation if you fail"

JUNIOR DOCTOR

I was treated like **my opinion mattered,** because consultants had time to care… **more genuine educational experiences**… perhaps most of all a feeling of time for **truly individualized, patient centred care** taking their circumstances into account. More time to care..”



Promote Thriving

Optimise wellbeing and generate future capabilities

….**Feedback** from juniors was not only encouraged but acted **on. I felt in control of my life, and my professional development, and was encouraged to be in control of both. I finally was doing what I’d wanted to do what I wanted to do all along– make a difference**”

(UK DOCTOR TALKING ABOUT HIS EXPERIENCES OVERSEAS)

Pillar	Building Block	Key Strategies
Mitigate Illness Monitor, accommodate, and treat illness, ill-health and injury.	Detect Illness	→ Build capacity to monitor & identify illness → Create HR systems for monitoring and detection
	Support and Accommodate Illness	→ Provide appropriate support → Remove barriers to support → Manage crisis & injury → Provide effective return to work processes
	Increase Individual Resources for Managing Mental Ill-health	→ Raise awareness of personal mental health → Build individual willingness to seek help → Build individual capacity to recover
Prevent Harm Minimise harm and protect against risk.	Increase Job Resources	→ S Provide stimulating work → M Provide mastery resources → A Provide agency → R Foster relational resources
	Ensure Tolerable Demands	→ T Create tolerable job demands: load & time, emotional, role, cognitive, environment & physical, and relational → Create tolerable organisational demands: organisational change, organisational justice & job security
	Increase Personal Resources for Preventing Harm	→ Foster resilience and coping → Support job crafting & other strategies to prevent stress → Support appropriate after-work strategies
Promote Thriving Optimise well-being and generate future capabilities.	Promote Purpose & Growth	→ Provide visions & foster purpose → Foster confidence & learning → Support career progression & lifelong development
	Promote Connection	→ Value connections & diversity → Foster work connections & linkages → Enable diversity and inclusion
	Increase Personal Resources for Thriving	→ Support job crafting for personal growth → Foster positive psychology practices → Support community engagement

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[Thrive At Work - Workplace Wellbeing Initiative](thriveatwork.org.au)
(thriveatwork.org.au)

See Parker, S. K., Jorritsma, K., & Griffin, M.A. (forthcoming). Shifting the Mental Health Conversation: Present and Future Applications of the "Thrive at Work" Framework. *In P. Brough, Daniels, K., & Gardiner, E. (Eds). Handbook on Health, Wellbeing, Management and Employment Practices, Springer.*

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Organisations often need most help here…

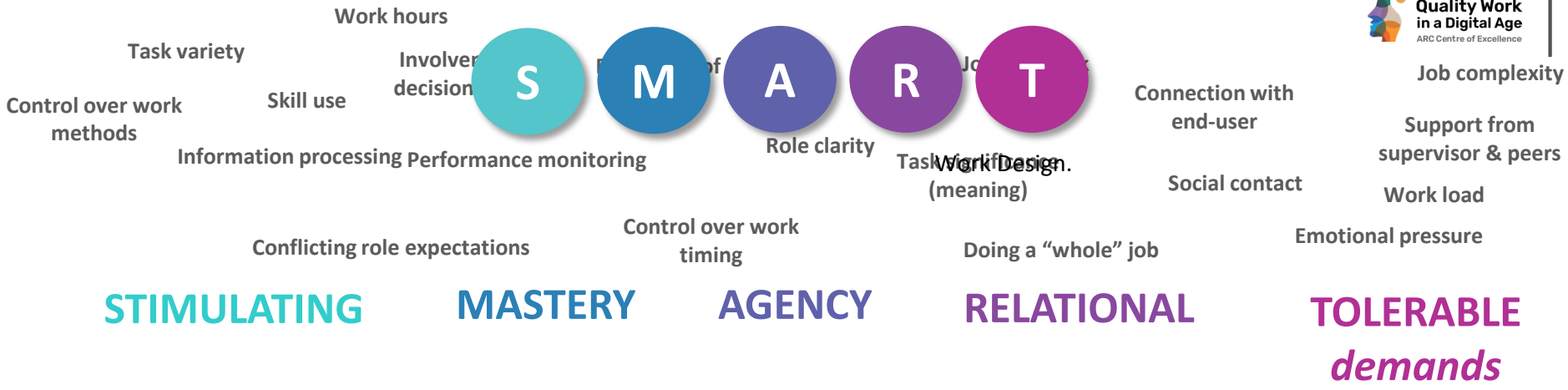
S M A R T work design

See Parker, S. K., Jorritsma, K., & Griffin, M.A. (forthcoming). Shifting the Mental Health Conversation: Present and Future Applications of the "Thrive at Work" Framework. *In P. Brough, Daniels, K., & Gardiner, E. (Eds). Handbook on Health, Wellbeing, Management and Employment Practices, Springer.*

Work Design

"the content and organising of tasks, activities, relationships, and responsibilities within a job or role, or set of jobs/roles"

Parker, 2014



See smartworkdesign.com.au

Parker, S. K., & Knight, C. (2024). The SMART model of work design: A higher order structure to help see the wood from the trees. *Human Resource Management*, *63*(2), 265-291.

Prevent Harm through the SMART Work Design Model

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"the content and organising of tasks, activities, relationships, and responsibilities within a job or role" Parker (2014)

S	M	A	R	T
Stimulating	**Mastery**	**Agency**	**Relational**	**Tolerable**
• Skill variety • Task variety • Problem-solving demands • Using & developing skills	• Role clarity • Feedback • Task identity (doing a whole piece of work)	• Control over work methods • Control over work scheduling • Decision-making control • Participative decision-making	• Social contact • Supervisor support • Support from peers • Social worth	• Manageable time pressure • Manageable emotional, physical, other demands • Low role conflict • Organisational justice • Positive change

Addresses stressors (psychosocial risks)

• Low challenge • Low variety/ high repetition • Low task significance • Poor skill utilisation • No opportunities for learning	• Low role clarity (ambiguity) • Unclear performance expectations • Low reward and recognition • Excessive monitoring • Over-controlling feedback	• Low job control • Excessive bureaucracy/ red tape • No opportunity to influence decisions	• Poor support • Negative workplace relationships (includes work-related bullying) • Isolation • Low social worth/ sense of impact	• Poor environmental conditions • Excessive demands eg long work hours, emotional pressure, always on culture • Injustice • Badly managed organisational change

See https: transformativeworkdesign.com/smart-work

Why does work design matter?



Mental health
e.g., depression, burnout

Motivation & performance e.g., job satisfaction creativity, core task performance, proactivity

Learning & growth
e.g., skill development, use of talent

Critical Foundation for Effective AI Deployment

Over 5000 articles- inc. meta analyses, longitudinal intervention studies etc

Parker, S. K., Morgeson, F. P., & Johns, G. (2017). One hundred years of work design research: Looking back and looking forward. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *102*(3), 403.

Example of Impact of Work Design For N=2000+ Carers

SMART work design

Demographics (eg age, contract type, gender, tenure, role type)

46%

6%



Burnout

Work design is neglected as a strategy

Symptom



Stress → EAP

Low job performance → Training

Low innovation → ‘Fun Zones’

Root Cause

Poorly designed work → SMART work

Table Activity: Sharing SMART Experiences

For your dimension (one letter from the SMART model), :

a. Identify an example of where you have observed **a high level of this SMART dimension.** Note that if you are allocated Tolerable, think of a situation in which you have observed team members' job demands becoming *more manageable and tolerable (that is, less demanding)*

b. Identify an example of where you have observed **a low level of this SMART dimension.** *Note* if you are assigned Tolerable, please think of a time when team members' work has become *less tolerable, that is, more demanding and overwhelming*.

Note - If you want a reminder of the dimension, see the hand outs or https://www.transformativeworkdesign.com/smart-work

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c. Put your responses into SLIDO & share with the person next to you

Stimulating MART Work Design.

- Skill variety
- Task variety
- Problem-solving demands
- Using & developing skills

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"There's never a dull moment…I like the variety"

"This job teaches me a lot"



Hospital supply workers

Stimulating MART Work Design.

- Skill variety
- Task variety
- Problem-solving demands
- Using & developing skills

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"Its boring, so much time waiting"…



• Risks of Unstimulating Work

- Individuals: Disengaged, 'bore-out, musculoskeletal injuries, lack of development
- Organisations: wasted talent, turnover, absenteeism, impaired performance, accidents and slower return to work after injury/illness

A lack of variety and doing a narrow job predicts burnout (meta analysis, Humphrey & Morgeson, 2007)

What Does Stimulating Work, or A Lack of Stimulating Work, Look Like In Your Unit/ Organization?

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Mastery SMART Work Design.

- Role clarity
- Feedback
- Task identity (doing a whole piece of work)

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"Regular appraisals help you to improve or to give you feedback if you did well"



Aged-care assistant

"Sometimes when you feel tired, you get emails or stars to tell you thanks. You feel appreciated"



- Role clarity
- Feedback
- Task identity (doing a whole piece of work)

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Example Research

- Meta analysis, 33 studies, 19,926 individuals:

  -Lack of role clarity significant predictor of depression

Schmidt, S., Roesler, U., Kusserow, T., & Rau, R. (2014). European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 23(1), 91-106.

Risks of Low Mastery Work

- Individuals: Job stress, poor well-being, job dissatisfaction, turnover, failure to learn
- Organisations: impaired performance, inefficiency, lack of agility

A lack of clarity (.33[1]) and lack of feedback (.17[2]) predicts burnout

Meta analyses 1) Alarcon, 2011; 2) Humphrey & Morgeson, 2007

Example Redesign: Efficient Surgical Team



5 min. multi-professional briefings prior to surgical list

Role clarity

Proactive planning

+

Team work

+

Encouraging Voice

Extensive research evaluation (e.g., 350 hours surgical observations)

Enhanced role clarity



"I feel unhappy if I haven't done a briefing before the beginning of the list. It's a bit like getting into a car and not putting a seat belt on – you just don't feel safe, you feel like something is missing." - Surgeon

"Briefings created an excellent work environment." - Anesthetic Technician

"(briefings) make a massive difference to how well we run the list for the day, it saves time and helps us to get to know our colleagues better." – Nurse

Example Findings



- Higher **staff engagement**
- **Efficiency**: 50% reduction in delays; significant cost savings
- **Patient safety**: Improved safety communication, communication across professional boundaries

Strongest results for "high quality" briefings

Back to overview slide

Parker, Carpini, Fruhen, Fleming, Leung, et al., (2018) Research Translation Report, Health Department.

What Does Mastery (Or Its Lack) Look Like In Your Work Unit/ Organization?

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Agency SMART Work Design.

- Control over work methods
- Control over work scheduling
- Decision-making control
- Participative decision-making

"What I want in my next job is a unit with some autonomy to make decisions... I'm exiting…"



Academic

"Every new thing that's centralized is another blow to innovation"

- Control over work methods
- Control over work scheduling
- Decision-making control
- Participative decision-making

Agency SMART Work Design.



Risks of Low Agency Work

- Individuals: Job stress, disengagement, turnover, lack of ownership, lack of learning, self efficacy and growth
- Organisations: impaired performance, reduced agility and innovation

A lack of control & autonomy predicts burnout

-.25 emotional exhaustion

-.30 cynicism

-.39 reduced accomplishment Meta analysis Alarcon, 2011

What Does Agency (Or Its Lack) Look Like In Your Work Unit/ Organization?

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SMART Relational Work Design.

- Social contact
- Supervisor support
- Support from peers
- Social worth/ connection with beneficiaries



Kindergarten teacher

"Being part of a good team is so important"

Relational SMART Work Design.

- Social contact
- Supervisor support
- Support from peers
- Social worth/ connection with beneficiaries

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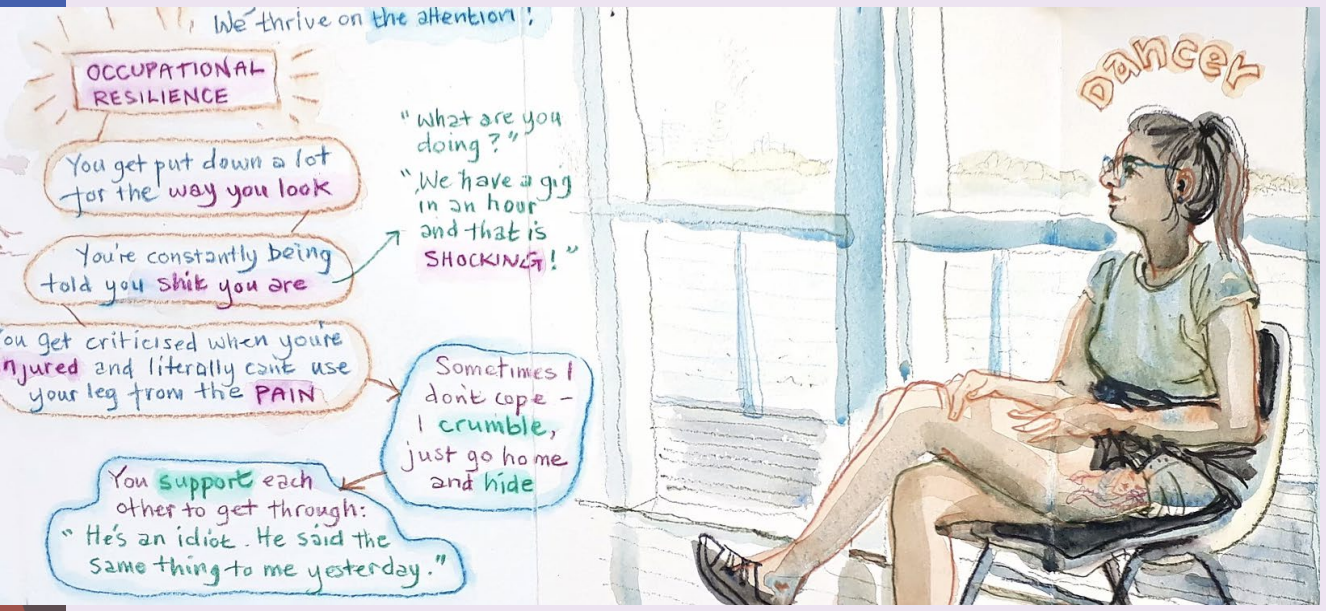

"You get put down a lot for the way you look.."

Risks of Low Relational Work

- Individuals: job stress, disconnection, turnover
- Organisations: impaired performance, workers' compensation cases

A lack of social support (-.34) & bullying (.26) predicts burnout

- Meta analyses Humphrey and Morgeson; Nielsen, M. B., & Einarsen, S. (2012). Outcomes of exposure to workplace bullying: A meta-analytic review. *Work & Stress*, *26*(4), 309-332.

What Does Relational Work Or Its Lack Look Like In Your Work Unit/ DFAT?

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SMART Work Design.

Tolerable

- Manageable time pressure
- Manageable emotional, physical demands
- Low role conflict
- Organisational justice
- Change management

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"The biggest challenge is having enough time"



Time pressure | Intellectual demands

"Most people don't realise that surgeons see things and deal with difficult situations, like where someone is terminally ill"



Emotional demands

SMART Work Design. Tolerable

- Manageable time pressure, work load
- Manageable emotional, physical demands
- Low role conflict
- Organisational justice
- Change management

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Risks of Intolerable Demands

- Individuals: job stress, anxiety, depression, burnout, mistakes, cardiovascular disease, home-work conflict
- Organisations: turnover, absenteeism, presenteeism, accidents, workers compensation claims, less and slower return to work after injury and illness

Role conflict and role overload predict burnout

.53, .49. Emotional exhaustion

.40, .31 Cynicism

.18, .11 Reduced accomplishment

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Tolerable SMART Work Design.

Example Study:
Organisational change and employee stress

- 90,000 workers from 1,500 organisations
- Those who work in organisations with high degree of change significantly more likely to access medications associated with insomnia, anxiety and depression

Dahl, M. S. (2011).

What Does Tolerable or Intolerable Work Look Like In Your Work Unit/ Organization?

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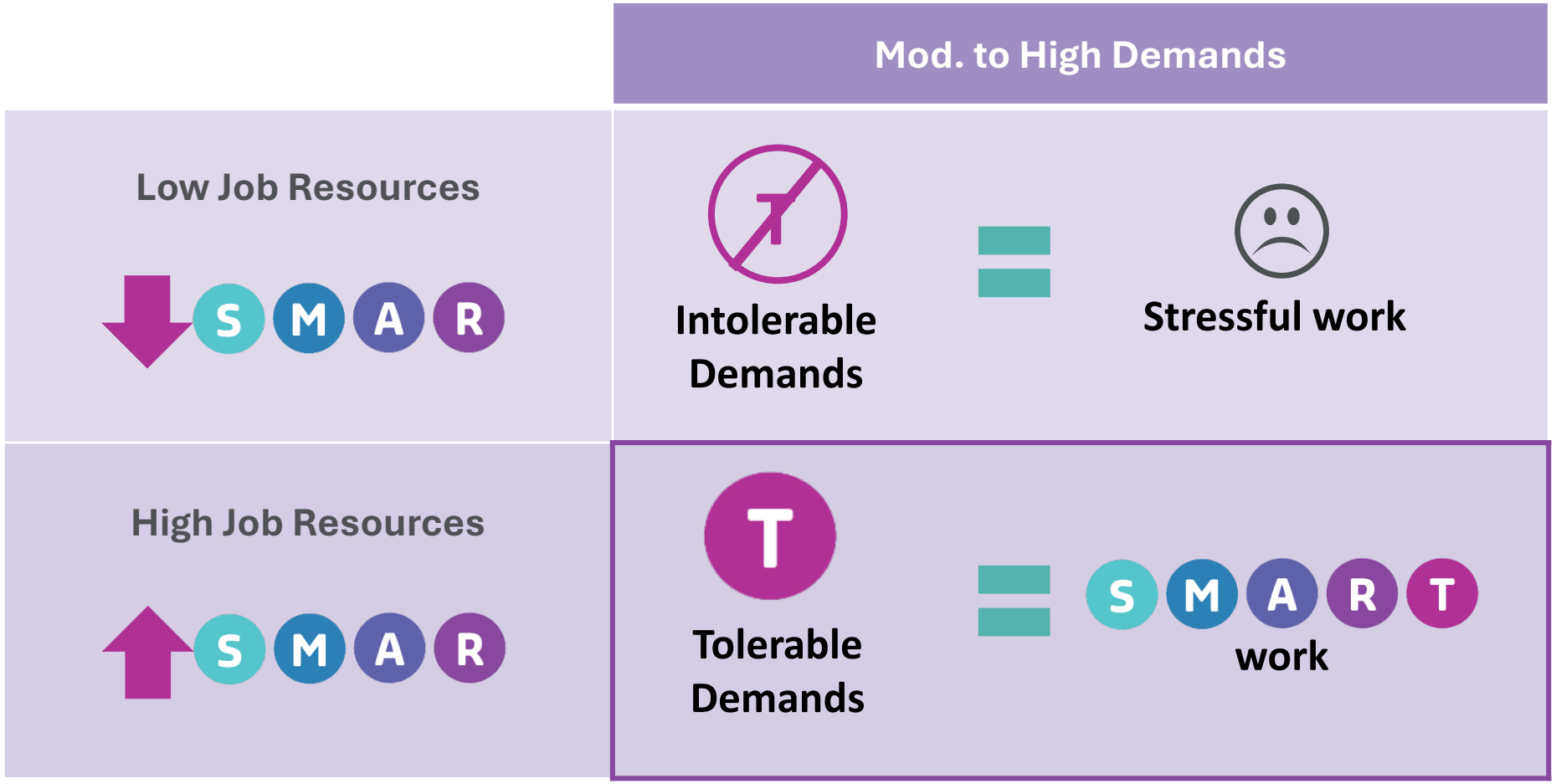
Job resources help make demands Tolerable



Examples

Police harassment
Paramedics
FIFO workers
Our simulation!

Consolidation Activity

SMART Question Challenge

Work together. Think critically. Move quickly!

How many can you get through?

1 Start at the top

Read out the first question on the sheet.



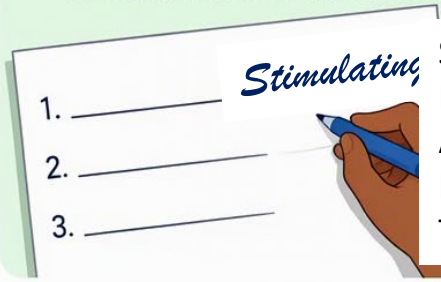
2 Anyone can answer

Any person in the group can answer the question.



3 Identify the SMART dimension

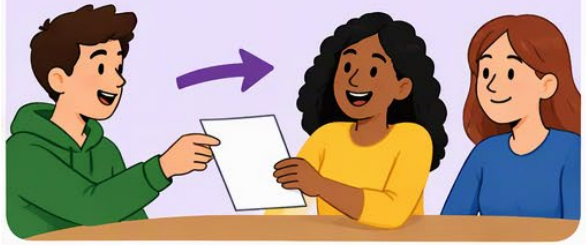
After someone has answered, as a group, identify which SMART dimension the question is about and write that down next to the question.



Stimulating
Mastery
Agency
Relational
Tolerable

4 Pass to the next person

Pass the sheet to the next person who will ask the next question.



5 Keep going!

Continue as fast as you can through the remainder of the questions.



Move quickly!

6 Goal

Get through as many questions as you can in the time available.



Quality answers. Team effort. Progress!

Ensure everyone has a turn answering the questions!

All voices matter!

How Might the SMART Model Be Used by HR Professionals?

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Ways SMART Model Can Be Used By HR

Improving mental health and well-being/ addressing psychosocial risks

Improving performance/ agility / innovation

Development more effective leaders

Addressing turnover/quiet quitting

Improving hybrid work/ working from home

Achieving benefits from AI

Other?

For more information & resources, see transformativeworkdesign.com/smart-work

Your Own Role

Which of the following aspects of the SMART model do you lack the most in your current role?

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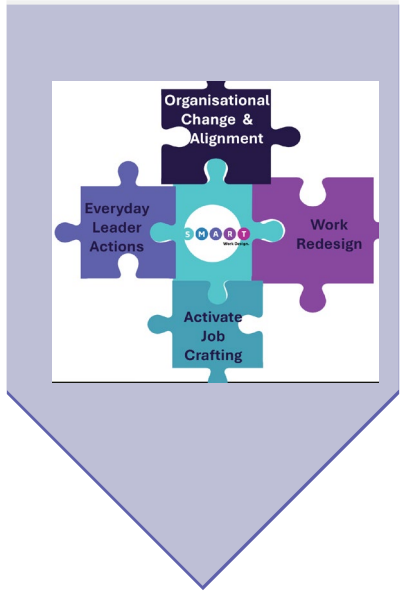
Plan



Work Design & the SMART model



Coffee



Smart Change Strategies



Lunch



AI and Work Design

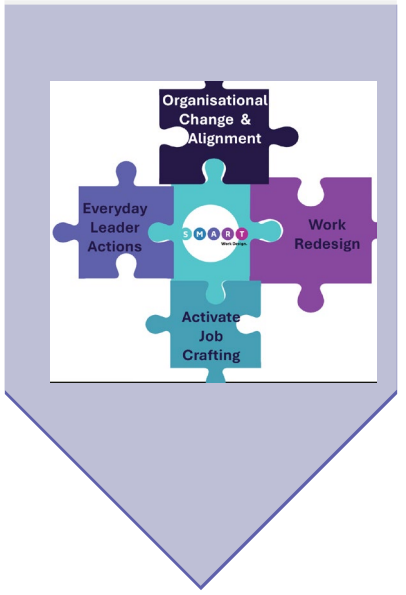
Plan



Work Design & the SMART model



Coffee



Smart Change Strategies



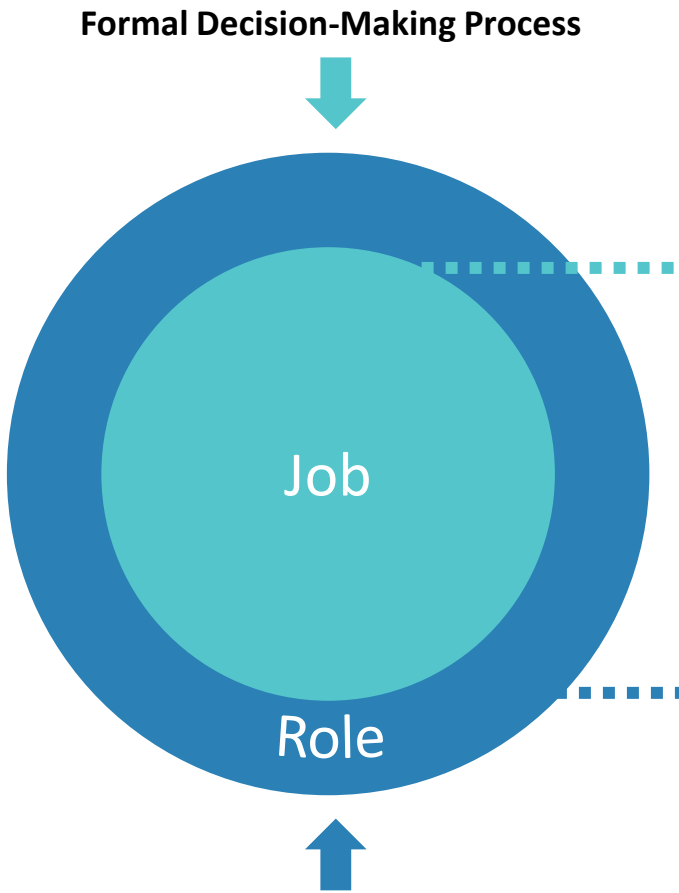
Lunch



AI and Work Design

What factors affect how SMART someone's work is?

Formal and emergent tasks



Features of A Job

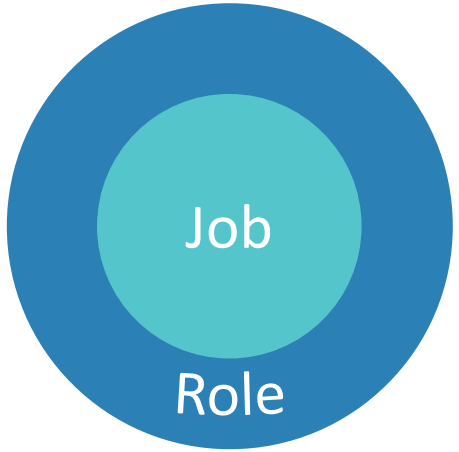
- Job descriptions describe the formal job
- A job includes the formal, established tasks and associated goals/KPIs
- A job is usually created by the organisation (e.g. by the HR department and the manager).
- A job is "independent" of the person who carries it out.
- A job is reasonably stable over time

Features of A Role

- Work is carried out in a dynamic, social and changing environment
- Job incumbents engage in emergent tasks and activities beyond the formal established ones detailed in the job description.
- Emergent tasks can be self-initiated, or tasks that a particular supervisor, client, or other person in the social environment expects.
- The "role" refers to the whole set of tasks (established + emergent)

Same same, but different





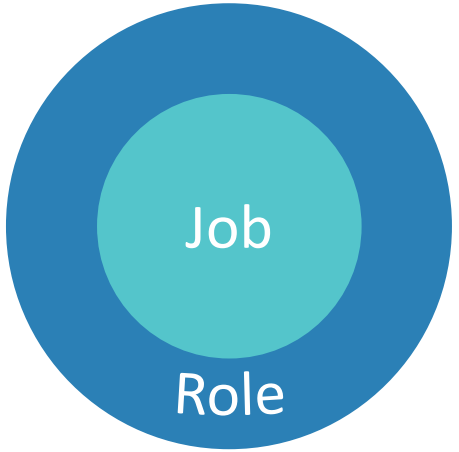
In some cases, there is very little difference between the formal job and the role.

In other cases, the role is very different from the formal job description.

Same “job”, different “roles”



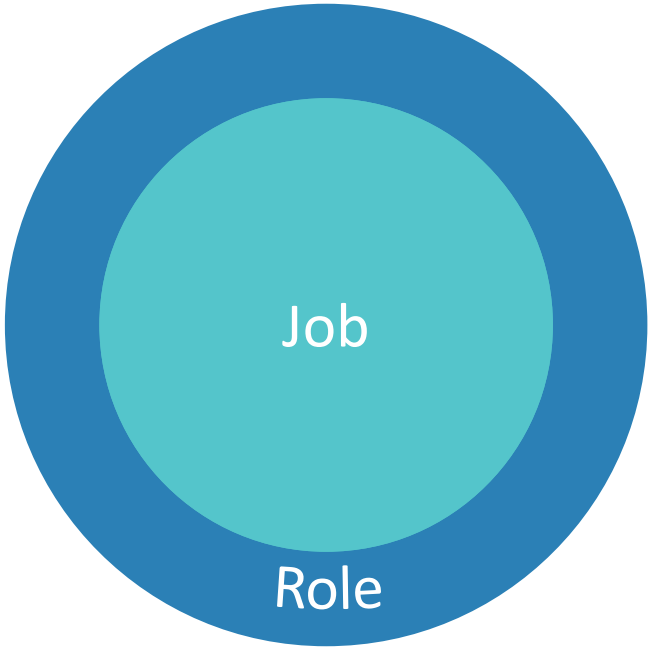
Sarah is PA in the public sector. She sticks reasonably closely to the job description of a PA, which involves managing her boss’s diary, and other such tasks. However, she has a special interest in travel, and has become highly proficient in organising travel through the IT system. Consequently, she provides advice to other admin assistants on how to navigate the complex travel system. Her boss tolerates Sarah doing this extra task, only so long as it doesn’t interfere with what the boss sees as her core tasks.



Mary is a highly proactive PA within a start-up company. She has a boss that encourages her to use her initiative and try new things. Over time, Mary has crafted a broader role. She not only carries out standard tasks such as managing her bosses’ diary but she also engages in other activities that make her job interesting to her and that help the team, such as helping to organise corporate events, coaching other staff on how to navigate the local HR systems, and more.

	Sarah (20/25)	Mary (22/25)
S	●●●○○ Sometimes Sarah finds her work a little dull and repetitive. She’s keen to develop and use some new skills.	●●●●● Mary has crafted the job around her strengths and finds it challenging and meaningful.
M	●●●●● Sarah is very clear what she is supposed to do, and gets plenty of leader feedback.	●●●●○ Mary is sometimes a little unclear as to what to prioritise in her work.
A	●●●○○ Sarah would like some more discretion in her work; she finds her boss is a bit of a micro-manager.	●●●●● Mary feels she has plenty of control over decision in her work. Her boss leaves her to largely decide how, when and what she does.
R	●●●●○ Sarah enjoys connecting with her peers & her boss.	●●●●● Mary enjoys connecting with her peers, her boss, and clients in her job.
T	●●●●● Sarah feels her job is very manageable, and doesn’t get overwhelmed or pressured.	●●●●○ Sometimes Mary takes on too many extra tasks, so sometimes her workload is a bit too high. Mostly its ok.

SMART Work is rarely just about the job description!



People's assessments of their SMART work characteristics will reflect, to some degree, their job description.

But their perceptions of their work design and the experiences of the job will not be a perfect match with the job description.

Knowing this, what shapes SMART work design outside of the job description?

Influences on work design

Contextual Influences

Higher-Level External Influences
Global | National | Occupational

Organisational Influences
Human Resource Mgt | Technology | Org Design
(and other systems/ culture)

Work Group Influences
Team Interdependence/Autonomy | Leadership

Individual Influences
Demographics | Personality | Motivation | KSAs

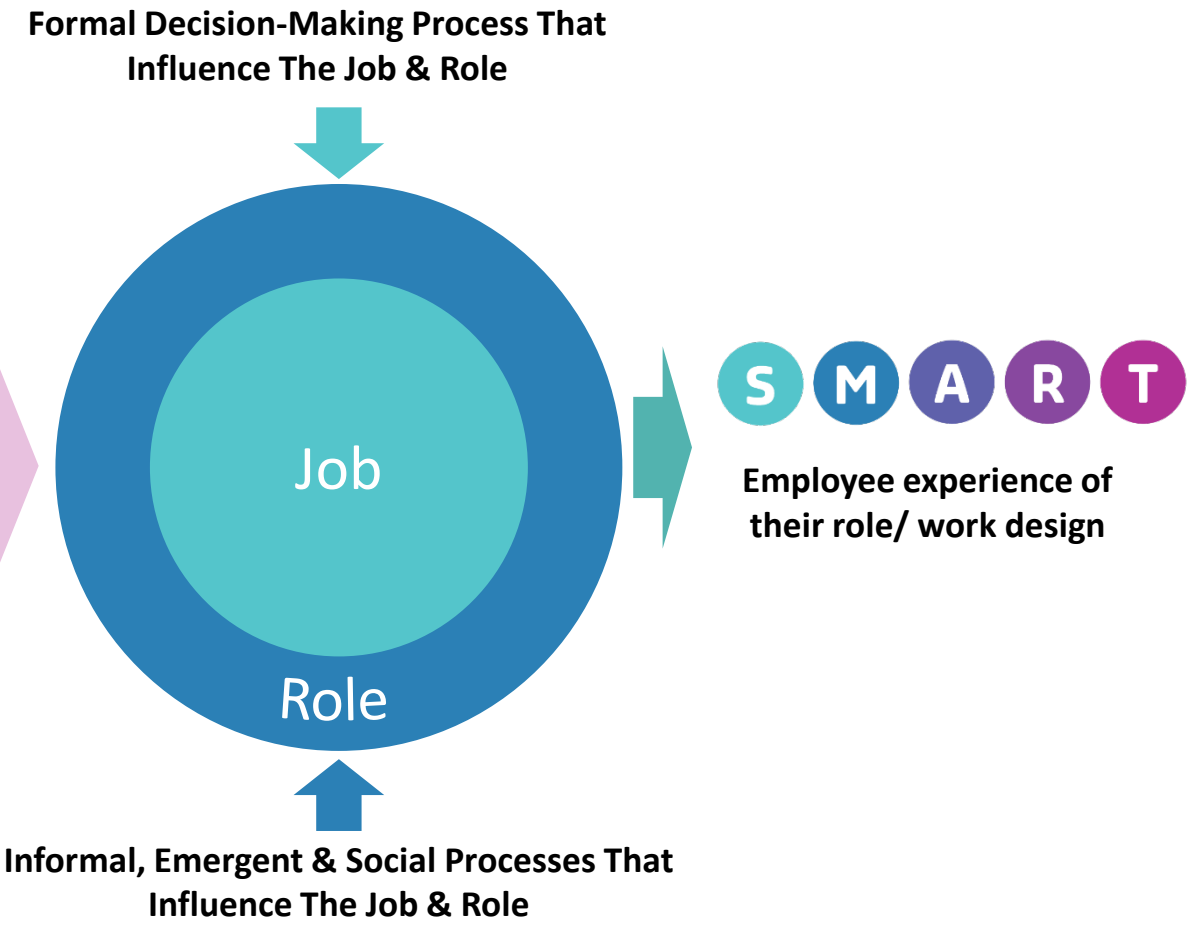
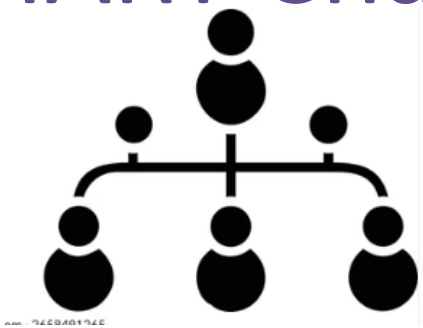


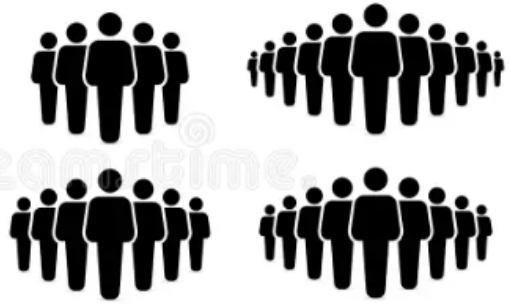
Figure 1. Framework of Work Design Influences

See paper by Parker, Van den Broeck, Holman, (2017) Academy of Management Annals

SMART Change Strategies



Organisation



Teams / Units



Individual



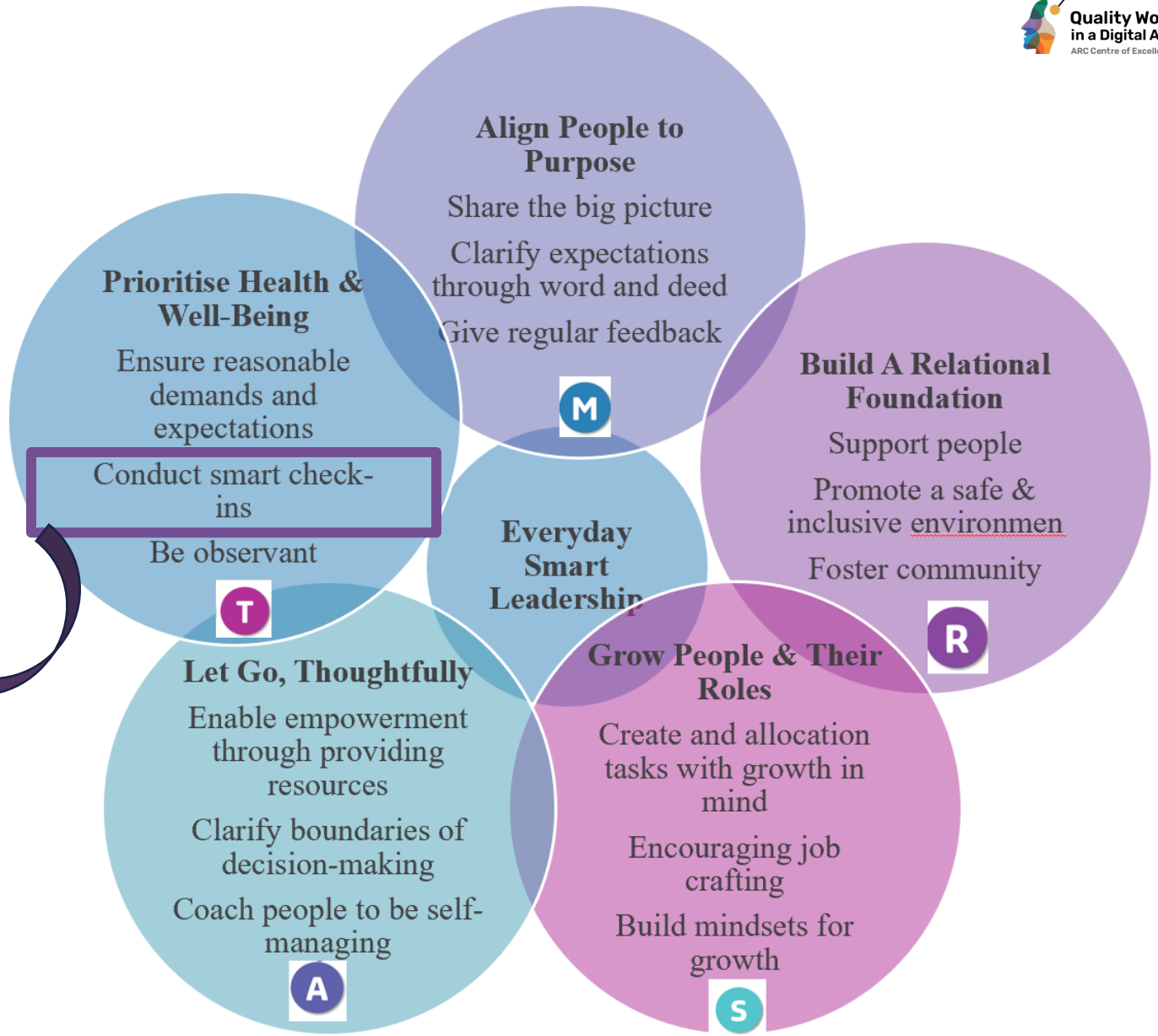


The “Ikea” effect

Activate Job Crafting

Everyday Leader Actions

Example:
Conduct smart check-ins



Parker, SK. *No More Crummy Jobs: SMART Work Design*. Book in preparation

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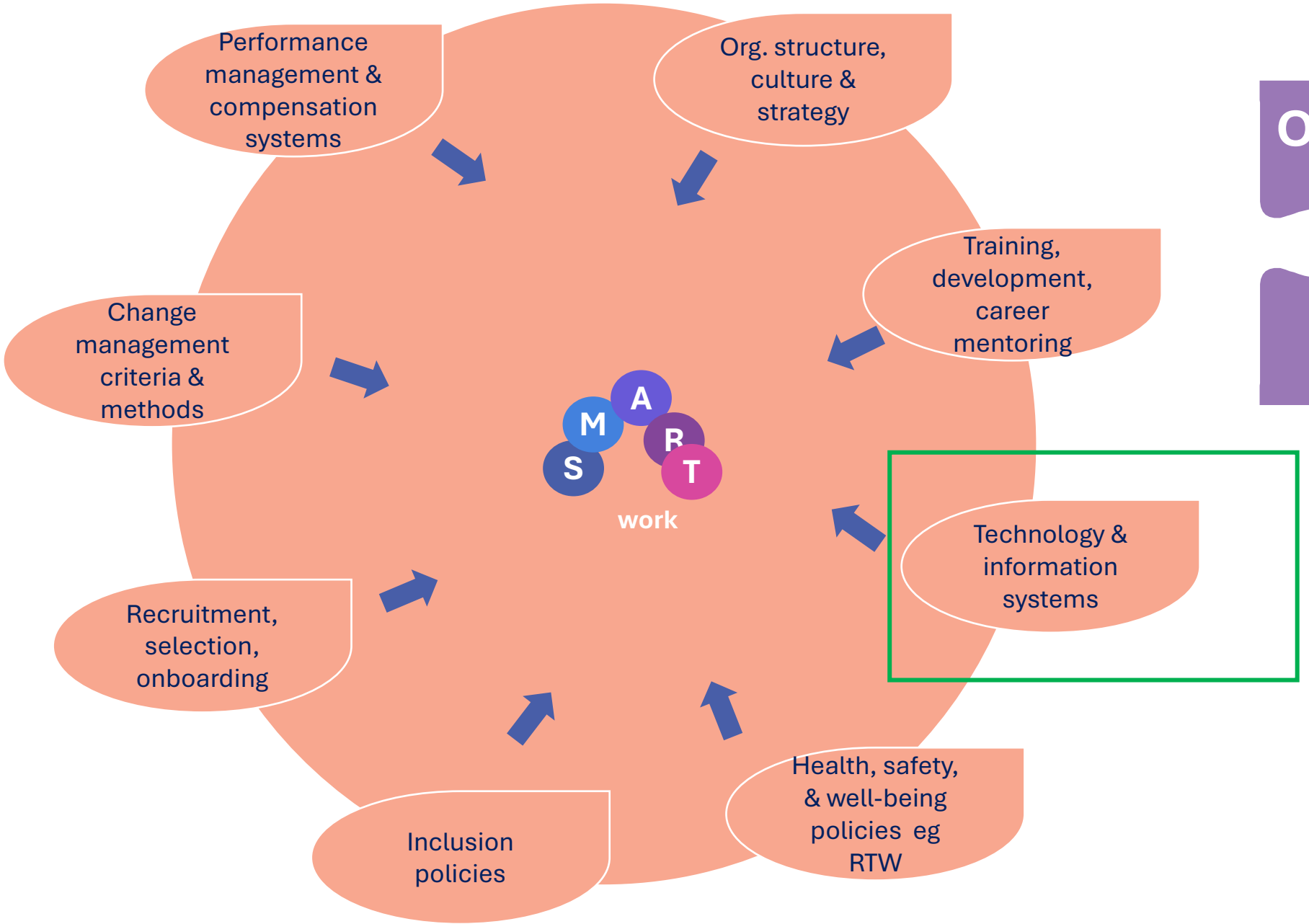
ARC Centre of Excellence

Curtin University

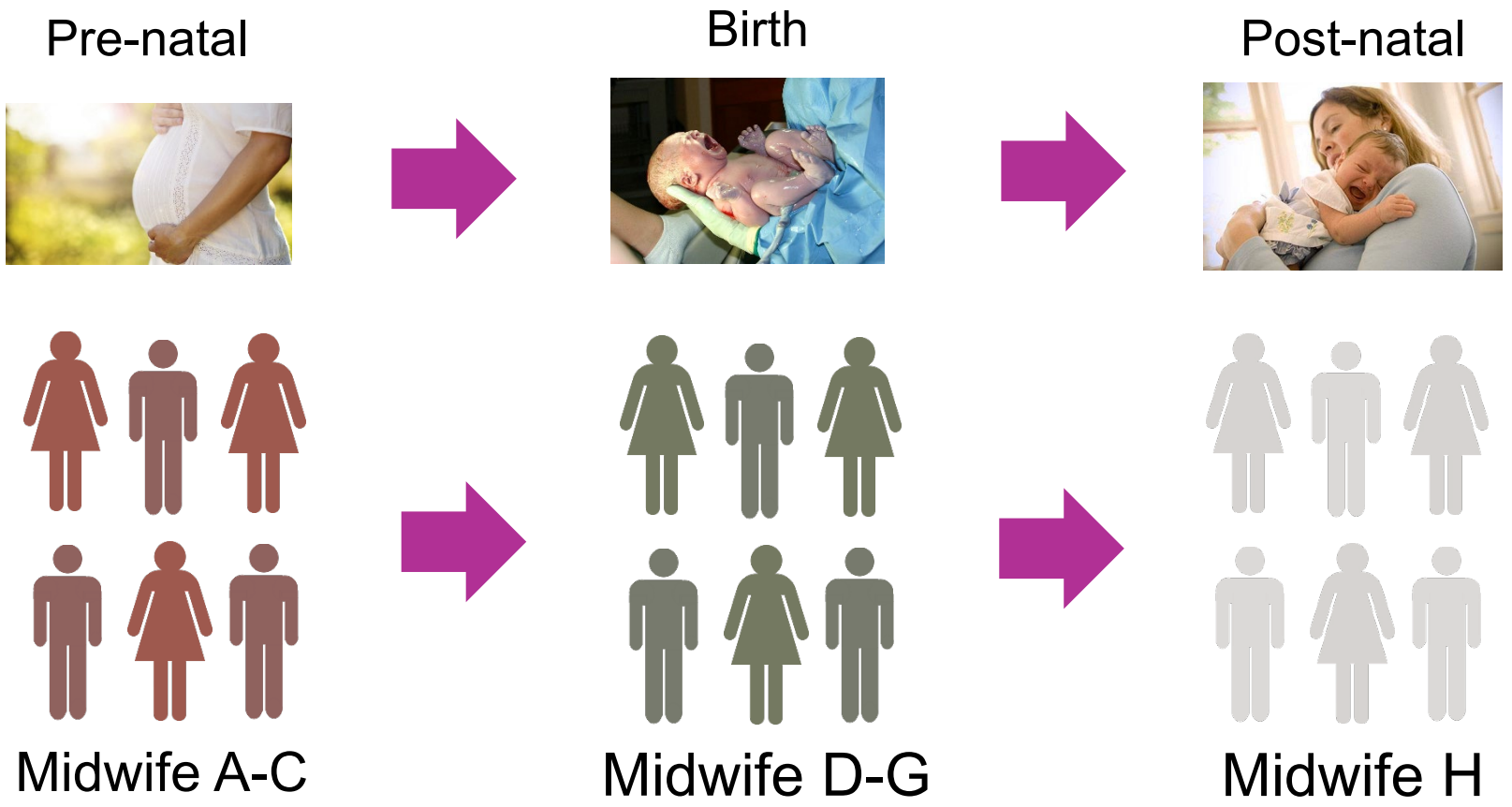
Organisational Alignment



An Example Work Redesign

Work Redesign

Standard midwifery model



What work design challenges might arise from this way of working?

SMART Challenges

S Highly specialised, lack of variety, problem solving demands might be lower

M Low task identity, relatively little feedback (but high role clarity)

A Constrained decision-making authority

R Good relationship with team but few relationships outside of team, minimal relationship with patient, low task interdependence

T Demands tolerable

How Might You Redesign This Work?

Work Redesign

Caseload midwifery model

Pre-natal



Birth



Post-natal



Midwife A,B x multiple ‘cases’

Midwife C,D x multiple ‘cases’

Midwife D,E x multiple ‘cases’

Outcomes

1748 pregnant women *randomly assigned to either Standard Work Design (N = 877) or Caseload Work Design (N = 871)*



For patients and the hospital*
Caseload work design resulted in:
- fewer elective caesarians; more spontaneous births
- less postpartum blood loss
- faster discharges
- more babies breastfed
- $556 cheaper per woman



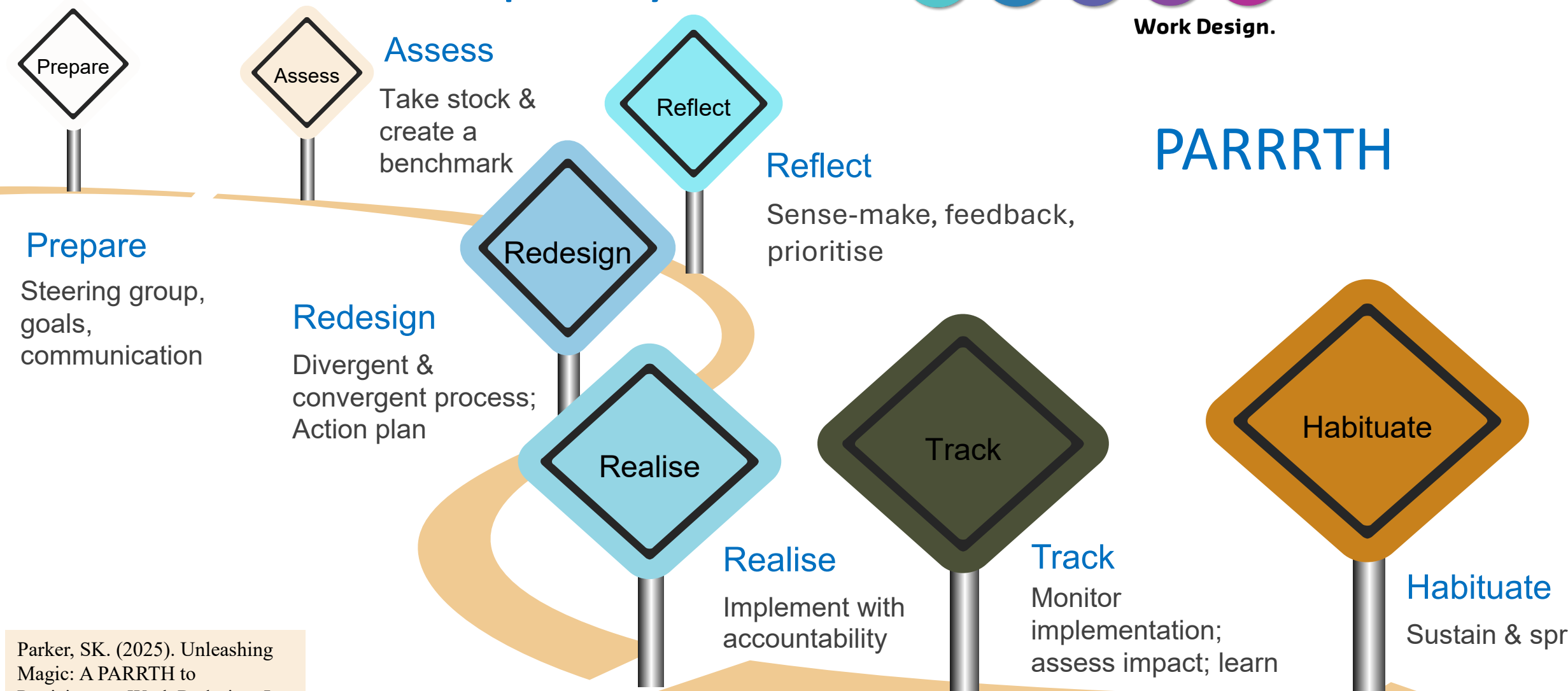
For Midwifes**
Caseload work design resulted in:
Significantly smarter work

More Stimulating, Mastery, Agency
Demands remained Tolerable
Better outcomes
- Lower intention to quit
- Higher job satisfaction

*[*reported by Stacey et al., 2013, Lancet]*
*[**Johnson & **Parker, in prep.** Same sample]*

When Redesigning Work “How” You Do it Matters…

A Participatory Path to SMART Work Design.



PARRRTH

Prepare
Steering group, goals, communication

Assess
Take stock & create a benchmark

Redesign
Divergent & convergent process; Action plan

Realise
Implement with accountability

Reflect
Sense-make, feedback, prioritise

Track
Monitor implementation; assess impact; learn

Habituate
Sustain & spread

Parker, SK. (2025). Unleashing Magic: A PARRTH to Participatory Work Redesign. In S.K Parker, C. Knight, Klonek, F.E., and Zhang, F. *Transformative Work Design: Synthesis and New Directions.* Oxford Univ. Press, New York.

Quality Work in a Digital Age

Call Centre Activity

- You have been approached by a government department who are looking to improve the overall working conditions their call centres. After some initial meetings, it becomes clear that the issues are stemming from poor work design. In order to address this, you have been asked to create some interventions for the branch. You get agreement to proceed with a participatory approach.
- As part of the "**Prepare**" phase, you decide to focus on one call centre where the team leader is keen to get on board. The call centre is responsible for contacting individuals and organising payment plans for outstanding debts. You ascertain this call centre has been experiencing issues with overall performance and has recorded record high levels of unplanned leave. Strategically, this is an important group to focus on. You set up a small project team involving one team leader, one call centre worker, one HR team member, and yourself. You proceed to **"Assess"**.

- Staff: 80 Staff Members, 5 Team Leaders, 1 Assistant Director and 1 Director

Assess the work design

You have already undertaken the following steps to better understand the issues facing the branch.

1. Interviews with the team leaders
2. Focus groups with frontline staff
3. A confidential survey of frontline staff

Reflect

As a team, based on the data from assess, identify strengths and challenges of the work design using the SMART model

Call Centre Work Design

Quality Work in a Digital Age
ARC Centre of Excellence

Curtin University

	Strengths	Challenges
STIMULATING		
MASTERY		
AGENCY		Slido.com #crf
RELATIONAL		
TOLERABLE DEMANDS		

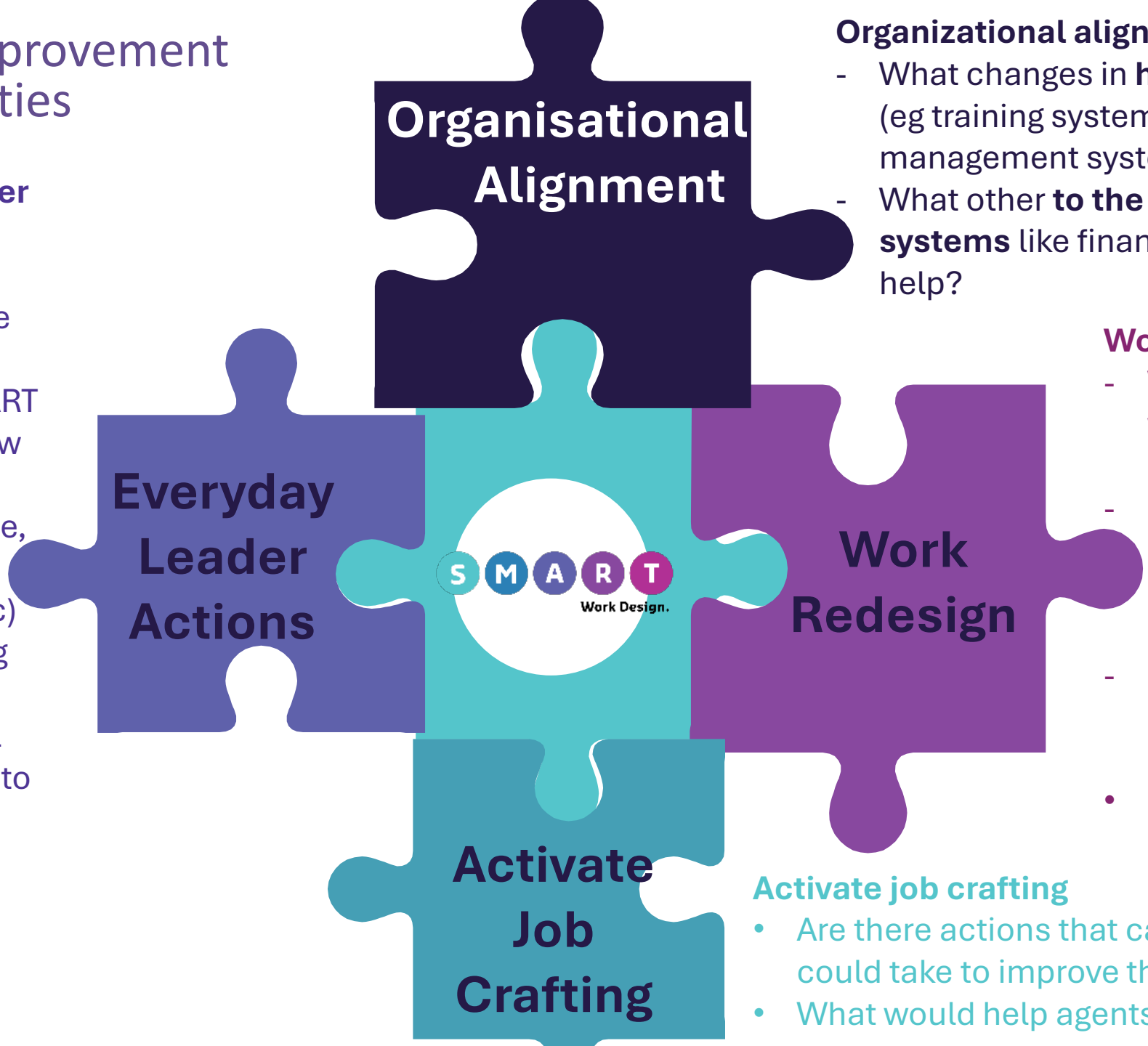
Redesign

As a team, given your reflections, prepare some recommendations for improvements that you would feed back to the organisation. Consider each of the different levers for improving smart work:

SMART Improvement Opportunities

Everyday leader actions

- What leader behaviors are needed to support SMART work? (eg how leaders communicate, delegate, set direction, etc)
- What training or other supports will help leaders to take these steps?



Organizational alignment

- What changes in **human resource policies** (eg training systems, performance management systems) might help?
- What other **to the structure or other systems** like finances, rosters etc would help?

Work redesign

- What new and better ways of working can be adopted?
- Can autonomy over how & when people do things be enhanced? Over scheduling?
- How might the tasks & activities in the job/ role be altered?
- How might demands be reduced?

Activate job crafting

- Are there actions that call centre agents themselves could take to improve their work?
- What would help agents to take these actions?

	Activate Job Crafting Amongst Agents (Are there actions that call centre agents themselves could take to improve their work? What would help agents to take these actions?)	**Everyday Leader Actions** (What supervisor/ manager behaviors are needed to support SMART work? (eg how leaders communicate, delegate, set direction, etc). What training or other supports will help leaders to take these steps?	**Work Redesign** (What new and better ways of working can be adopted? Can autonomy over how & when people do things be enhanced? Over scheduling? How might the tasks & activities in the job/ role be altered? How might demands be reduced?)	**Organizational Alignment** (What changes in human resource policies (eg training systems, performance management systems) might help? What other to the structure or other systems eg finances/ rosters etc would help)?
Stimulating				

Use the sheet to record your thinking as a team

Call Centre Role Design – What actually happened?

Challenge

Improvements

STIMU

MAS

AGE

RELAT

TOLE
DEM

o 'key talking points'
n in script usage as

quest process and
ng for support and

e instructed to
riteria, allowing a
each way

ed in to address
tional training was
eaders

ndovers well
nd key
ocesses was
shared throughout the organisation

Some missed opportunities too… For example:

Work Redesign

- Redesign the role for client continuity (supported by technology)
- Give the team control over their schedules/ have local control over the schedules
- Debriefs for supporting emotional demands/ emotional support amongst peers

Org. Alignment

- Change the KPIs to align with job requirementa
- Develop leaders to foster SMART work, embed it into performance requirements

Barriers:

1) Workshop time 2) Insufficiently deep look at work processes 2) Some aspects out of Circle of Control of stakeholders involved

Other Call Centre Examples of Work Redesign

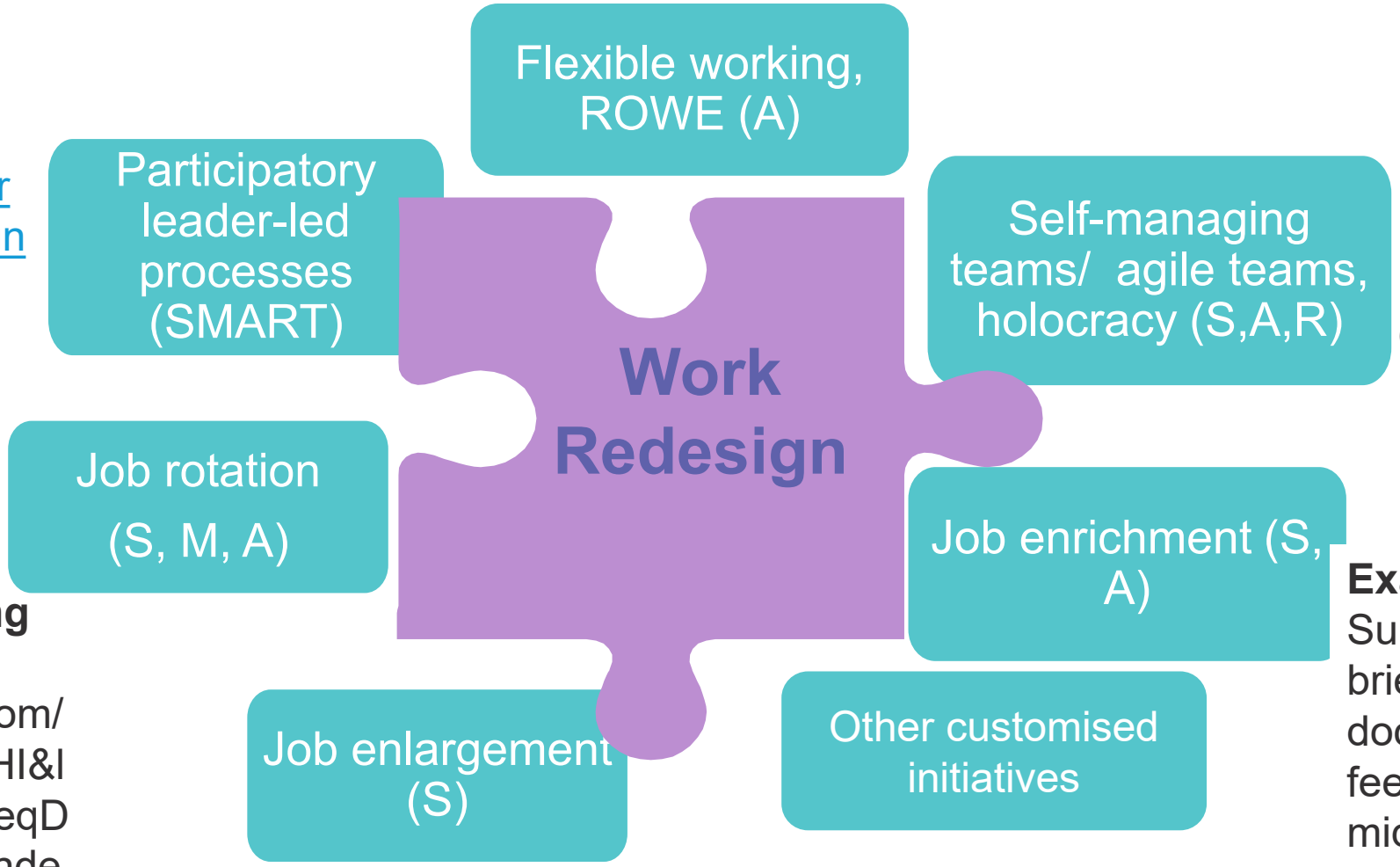
UK example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2-I8ojWpCQ

Adam Grant research



Other Examples of Work Redesign

Design for Care
SMART Design for Care | Work Design Research



Buurtzorg example

Brazilian shoe making example
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwoL3TXSEHI&list=PLHtLvaitwzyN6igeqDGIeyUkA6vwaO9a0&index=1

Examples: Surgical team briefings; junior doctor example, feedback studies, midwives, BMW

Critical Success Factors For Work Redesign

No one size fits all

- Variation in goals & scope of design, the organisational context, etc.
- Beware ‘off the shelf’ “solutions”
- Diagnosis is crucial

Engage decision-makers eg managers, interdependent roles

Participation of the actual workers is key

- Not ‘pseudo’ participation
- Managing the ‘risks’

Align wider systems and culture

- Align culture, training, payment, selection, information, appraisal criteria, physical layout
- Supporting leader and worker training & development

Learn from experts

- Most managers do not know about work design
- Most professionals have partial experience

Learn from experience and evaluate

- Iterate, evaluate, iterate



See Safe Work Australia “work design principles” www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au; co-designed by Sharon Parker

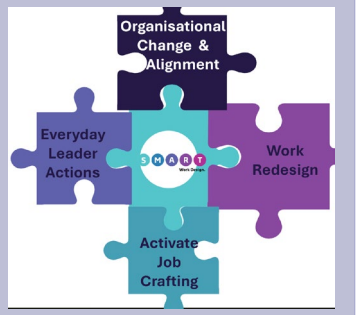
Plan



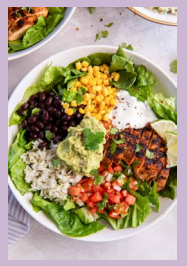
Work Design & the SMART model



Coffee



Smart Change Strategies



Lunch



AI and Work Design

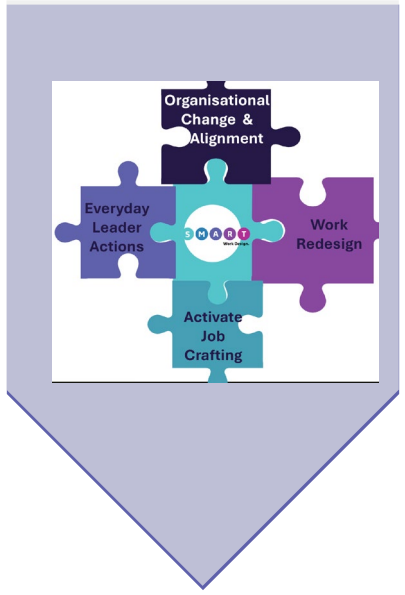
Plan



Work Design & the SMART model



Coffee



Smart Change Strategies



Lunch



AI and Work Design

Two Key Questions

1. What is the impact of AI deployment on people's work design/ SMART work?

AI (artificial intelligence)

Teachers at Euan Blair firm report 'horrendous stress' after AI used to rate their work

Exclusive: Instructors at tech training company Multiverse hit out at 'remorseless' and 'unnerving' monitoring system



2. Does having SMART work design help deliver the benefits of AI?

AI Deployment at Novapay: A Case Study

Sharon K. Parker and Annika Mertens



Part A

European digital payments company serving millions of customers

CEO keen to use AI to reduce need for service agents in context of rapid growth

Implementation of AI-First Call Initiative

Step 1 Create the project team and set the goals

Technical project team led by the Chief Technology Officer



Cybersecurity **Data engineering** **Product management**

Our goal

Automate as much customer service work as technically possible to reduce labour costs and increase productivity.

Project team works closely with an external generative-AI provider

Customer-service leaders advised on existing processes. HR was consulted after implementation.

Step 2: Identify the key tasks

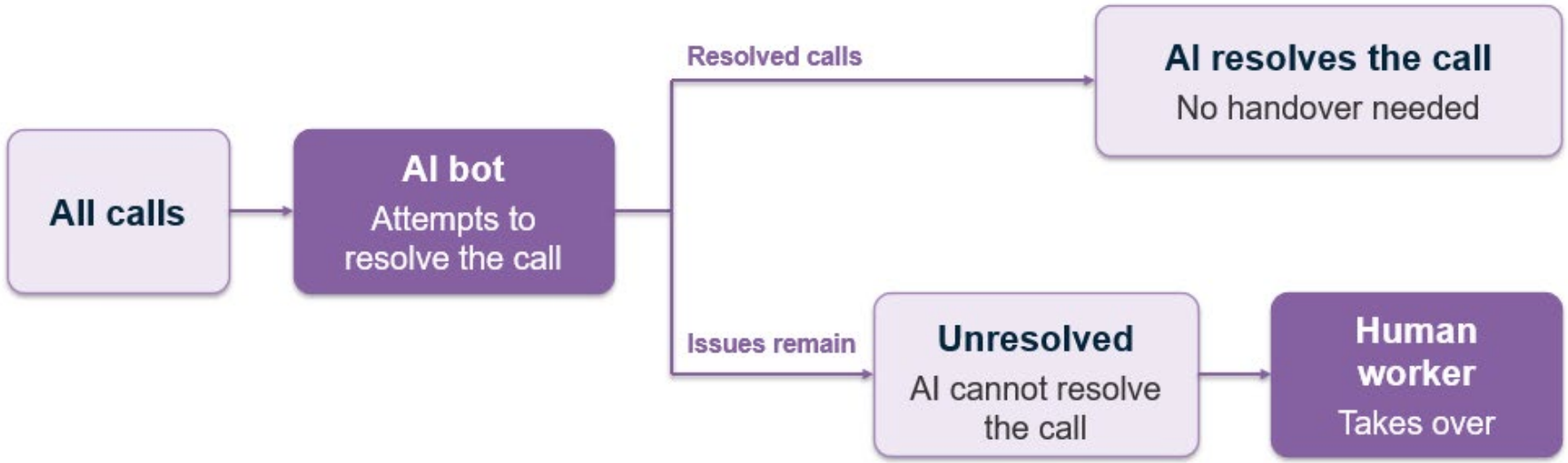
Step 3: Identify which tasks can be automated

The project team assessed each task's technical feasibility: Could AI understand the request, access relevant information, generate an appropriate response, and execute the required action reliably? If so, the task was considered suitable for automation. For example:

Task	Automation potential	Decision
Customer identification	Very high	Automate
FAQ responses	Very high	Automate
Account retrieval	Very high	Automate
Call summarisation	Very high	Automate
Routine refunds	High	Automate
Billing questions	High	Automate
Product recommendations	High	Automate
Complaint classification	High	Automate
Routine complaints	High	Automate
Complex complaints	Medium	Escalate
Highly unusual cases	Low	Human
Legally sensitive cases	Low	Human

Step 4: Build the technical system

Step 5: Develop the operating model



Step 6: Measure the short-term results

Part A Team Discussion

Analyse the AI First Call Approach

Think about these individually, and then share your answers with your team. Add brief summaries of your answers to SLIDO

A1. What are limitations of the goal that was set, and of the composition of the project team? (step 1).

A2. What might the approach of identifying discrete tasks (Step 2) then deciding which to automate (Step 3) overlook or get wrong?

A3. Although the initiative was promising in the short-term, what longer-term risks could occur as a result of the approach adopted in AI First Call?

A1. What are limitations of the goal that was set, and of the composition of the project team? (step 1).

- Technocentric goals/ success criteria focused on extent of automation/ labor replacement
- No goals around work quality, customer trust, development of skills, innovation (or similar)
- Team composition is narrow and technocentric

A2. What might the approach of identifying discrete tasks (Step 2) then deciding which to automate (Step 3) overlook or get wrong?

Task analysis useful & systematic basis for analysis, and aligns with expected approach. BUT....

1. Ignores task interdependence
2. Just because something can be automated, doesn't mean it should be
3. Positions automation vs augmentation as binary.

A3. Although the initiative was promising in the short-term, what longer-term risks could occur as a result of the approach adopted in AI First Call?

Inability to achieve or sustain productivity benefits due to inattention to "socio" factors

Impaired well-being, motivation/ performance, and learning as a result poor human work design

The “Klarna” Effect



INDEPENDENT

Klarna’s AI replaced 700 workers. It now wants some of them back to improve customer service

Rachel Dobkin
23 May 2025 • 2 min read

Klarna CEO Sebastian Siemiatkowski has announced plans to beef up its human customer service team after artificial intelligence replaced 700 workers.

The "buy now, pay later" company's use of AI to cut jobs came after the company has seen its valuation drop to $6.7 billion, despite peaking at $45.6 billion in 2021.

But now, Siemiatkowski has suggested that the AI job cuts have led to "lower quality" customer service and is backpedaling by vowing to hire more humans.

Further Examples

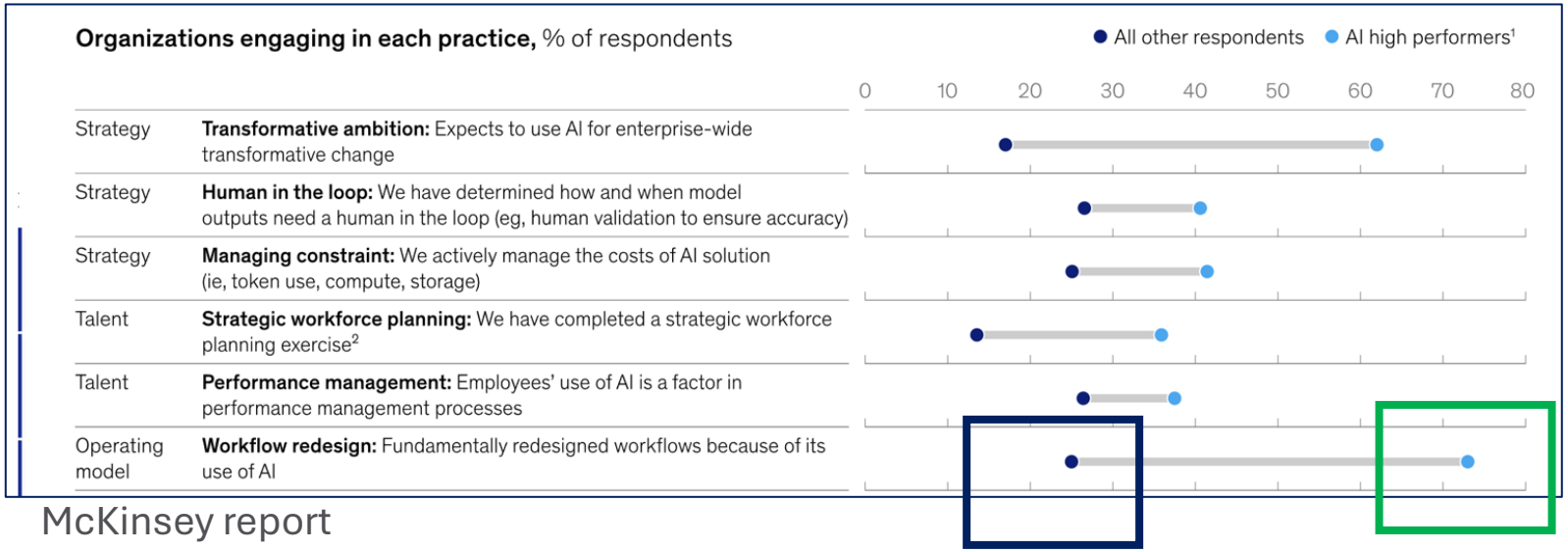


Australia's biggest bank says corporate AI is racking up bigger bills and producing 'work slop'

Senior leaders do not see AI investments translating into productivity gains. Eg:

- Only 6% companies report a significant enterprise-level benefit; 37% some small benefit;(McKinsey, 2026)
- 5% firms generating substantial AI value (BGC, 2025)
- 72% of CIOs report their organisations are breaking even or losing money on AI investments (Gartner, 2025)
- And many other similar reports!

Work Design is Key To Achieving Success and Sustainability



McKinsey report

Other users

AI high performers

Academic research supports these ideas!

Example studies

Raji & Kumar, 2022

Dell'Acqua et al., 2023; Brynjolfsson et al., 2018; Humlum & Vestergaard, 2025

Bonetti et al., 2023

Part B: Emerging Risks with AI-First Call and a New Approach

Customer experiences with AI support

Trapped in a loop



"It was fine until something unusual happened. Then it felt like I was trapped in a loop. The chatbot clearly didn't understand why my situation was different."

Reassurance without resolution



"Every message sounded reassuring, but nothing was actually being resolved. After a while the friendly language just made me more annoyed."

Starting over



"I explained the problem three times. Each time it started again from the beginning. By the time I finally reached someone, I was far more frustrated than when I started."

A person could have helped



"The most frustrating part was knowing that [a person] could probably have sorted this out in five minutes, but I couldn't find a way to reach one."

Barriers to an employee



"It felt as though the whole system had been designed to stop me talking to an employee rather than to solve my problem."

Employee experiences: everyday work

More difficult conversations



"Before, you would have a mixture of straightforward and difficult customers. After the AI came in, nearly every conversation was a complaint or someone who was already frustrated."

Losing the story



"You lose the story of what happened. You see the problem, fix something, close it and move to the next problem."

Learning on the job



"Experienced agents can handle the unusual cases because we learnt from years of dealing with ordinary ones. But where will the next generation of agents get that experience?"

Pressure to work faster



"Because the AI could handle standard questions almost instantly, expectations about our speed changed too. But the cases coming to us were exactly the ones that couldn't be solved instantly."

Job insecurity



"When management celebrated how many conversations the AI was handling, we all just thought it's just a matter of time before they get rid of us."

Losing customer insight

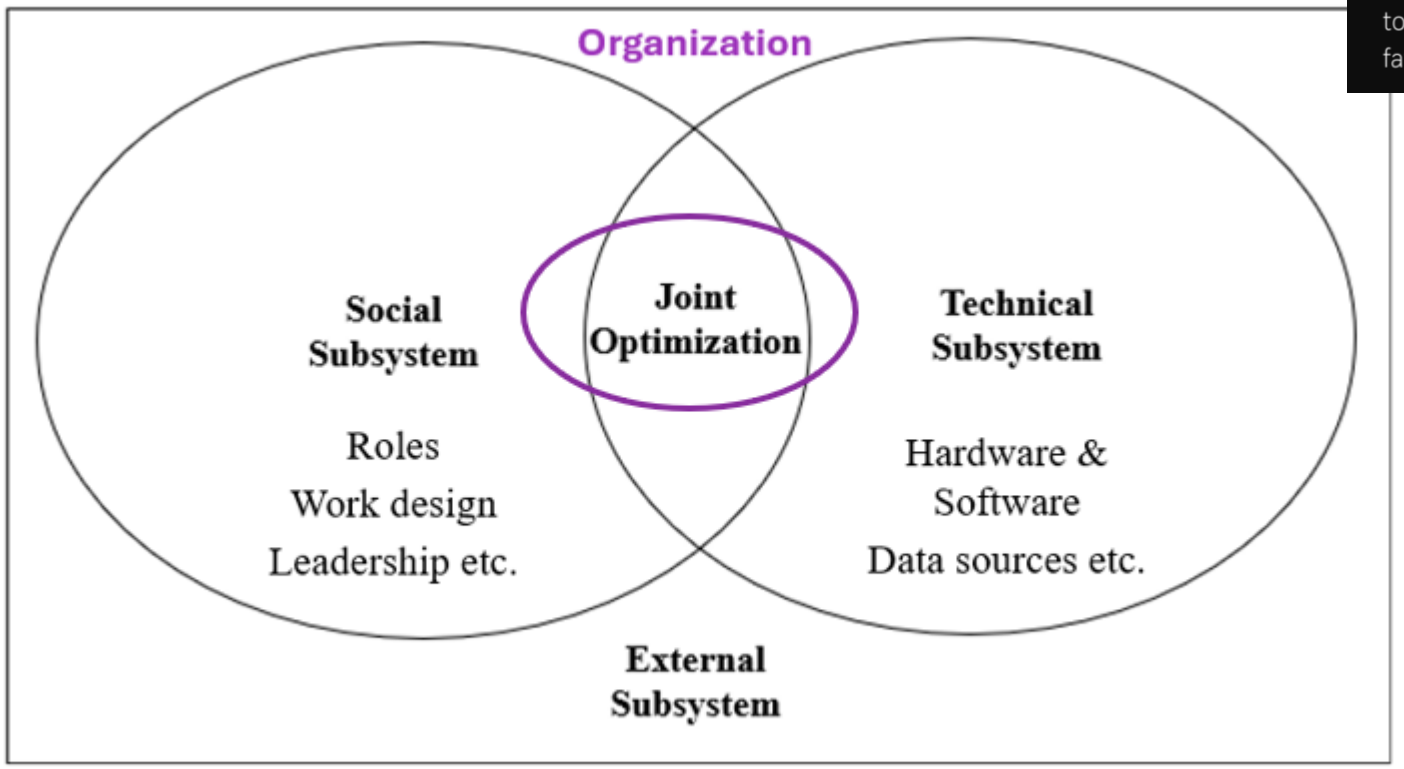


"When you speak to customers all day, you notice patterns. … If most of those conversations happen with AI, we lose what customers are experiencing."

Time for A New Approach: A Sociotechnical Approach



A 1951 Yorkshire coal mine holds the key to why 70% of digital transformations fail today.



Step 1: Create the sociotechnical team and define the goal

CEO-led redesign of Novapay customer service, guided by QWiDA

Sociotechnical project team



Social: HR, customer-service management
and frontline staff

Technical: AI and technology experts

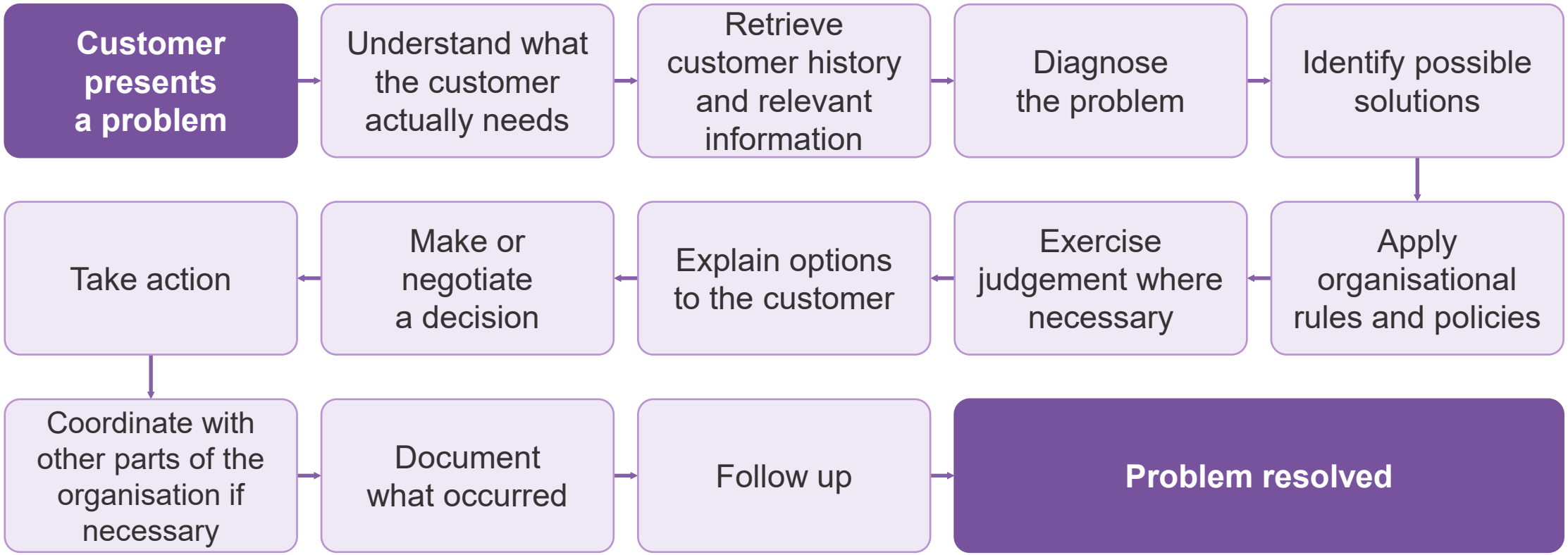
Our shared goal

Design a human-AI customer-service system that resolves customers' problems effectively, efficiently and fairly, provides a high-quality customer experience, and creates sustainable, effective human work.

Joint optimisation: design people, work and AI together so the whole system performs effectively.

Step 2: Analyse the customer-service work system

The work behind a customer enquiry: A customer enquiry is rarely just a single task.



Analysis of ‘variances’ (problems, exceptions)

- Where do delays and bottlenecks occur? Where are mistakes most likely?
- What information is needed at different points?
- Where is human judgement required?
- Where would AI support human performance rather than replace it?
- What happens when the AI is uncertain or wrong?
- How does a complex case move between the customer, AI, human agent and other organisational units?

This analysis produced an important insight, which is that a new work design was needed. But figuring out the best work design first required an analysis of the existing work design.

Step 3: Analyse the work design

Your Tasks

Task B1: Analyse the current “Worker Does Leftovers” design

Table: SMART Analysis of Worker Does Leftovers Design

SMART	Guiding Questions	Strengths to maintain	Risks
Stimulating	Does the redesigned role provide variety, challenge & chance to use different skills? What opportunities do people have to develop expertise?		
Mastery	Do employees have clear goals? Do they receive feedback about their performance? Can they see a whole customer issue through to completion?		
Agency	How much discretion does the employee have? Can employees override AI		

Your Tasks (continued)

.

Task B2: Redesign the Customer Service

Your job is to help the project team. Working together as a team, identify at least two different, and higher quality, work design options that clarify what is the role of the human and the AI (tasks, activities, decision-making etc), and how will they interact? Briefly summarise and label these options.

Put the labels of one or more of your work designs in SLIDO

Task B3. Evaluate design options

Next, evaluate each work design against SMART criteria, as well as customer criteria (see Table below).

- "Worker Does Leftovers" model has already been completed

	1. Worker does leftovers	Option 2 _____	Option 3_____
Brief description of design	AI is the primary service provider. Handles as much customer work as possible, passing unresolved cases to humans. Handles what AI cannot resolve.		
Stimulating	AI is the primary service provider. Handles as much customer work as possible, passing unresolved cases to humans. Handles what AI cannot resolve.		
Mastery	Mixed/low. Cases may be challenging, but humans face a concentrated stream of difficult exceptions. Easy successes and natural task variety disappear.		
Agency	Low–moderate. Workers can become expert in difficult cases, but have fewer opportunities to learn across the full range of customer problems.		
Relational	Low. AI largely determines which cases humans receive. Humans may inherit situations without controlling the preceding process.		
Tolerable	Mixed/low. Human contact remains, but disproportionately involves customers frustrated by unsuccessful automated service.		
Effects on Customer Satisfaction	Risk of lower satisfaction for customers reaching humans. Customers may have already experienced an unsuccessful AI interaction and then need to repeat or explain complex problems. Quality depends on the handover from AI to human		
Other			

Debrief Part B

12 Work Design Options for Call Centre Agents

Different ways to combine human and AI work in customer service

The same AI technology can lead to very different human jobs. It's not just what AI can do, but what role we design for the human.

1 Residual-work or "AI leftovers" agent

AI handles what it can; humans deal with the rest.



- Human deals with: unusual cases, AI failures, angry customers, complex or high-risk issues
- Often high cognitive and emotional demands
- Risk of a narrow, difficult and less varied job

2 AI-supervised exception handler

AI handles normal cases and flags exceptions for human judgement.



- Reviews AI-flagged exceptions
- Checks AI reasoning, gathers more information
- Decides whether to override normal rules
- Can be high-skill if real discretion is given

3 AI-advised agent (human in command)

Human manages the customer interaction with AI providing advice and information.



AI suggests:
- relevant information
- possible solutions
- draft wording

- Agent keeps control and makes the final decision
- AI retrieves information, suggests options, highlights relevant policies
- Preserves autonomy and human relationships

4 Human-led service with an AI "copilot"

Human and AI work together throughout the interaction.



Before: brief agent
During: real-time support
After: summarise & draft

- AI supports before, during and after the call
- Transcribes, retrieves info, suggests questions, drafts notes
- Human owns the interaction from start to finish

5 AI as administrative assistant

AI automates the "work around the work" so humans can focus on the customer.



AI handles:
- search & data entry
- call transcription
- case notes & forms
- scheduling follow-ups

- Human focuses on conversation, judgement and relationship building
- Can reduce workload demands and increase time for meaningful work

6 The human "sense-maker"

AI provides information and analysis; the human interprets what it means.



- Interprets information and assesses AI recommendations
- Uses judgement to decide what is relevant and fair
- High-skill role if agents have authority to act

7 Relationship and empathy specialist

AI handles information-intensive tasks; humans focus on the human side.

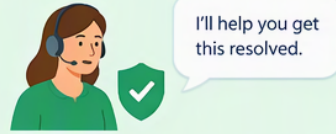


Focus on:
- empathy
- trust and reassurance
- negotiation
- conflict resolution
- vulnerable customers

- Concentrates on emotional and relational needs
- AI retrieves facts and handles routine processing
- Needs adequate support and recovery time

8 The customer advocate

Human acts in the customer's interests within an automated organisation.



- Can challenge automated decisions and obtain exceptions
- Stays with the customer until the problem is resolved
- High task significance and sense of purpose

9 The human AI-overseer

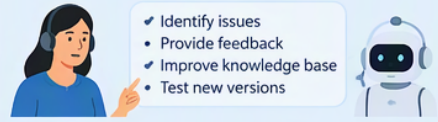
Monitors AI agents that serve customers and intervenes when needed.



- Monitors multiple AI interactions
- Flags and responds to issues (errors, frustration, risk)
- Requires specialised monitoring and diagnostic skills
- Risk of long periods of low activity and sudden spikes

10 The AI coach and quality improver

Uses frontline experience to improve how AI performs.



- Identify issues
- Provide feedback
- Improve knowledge base
- Test new versions

- Reviews AI interactions and identifies errors or gaps
- Suggests improvements to responses and workflows
- Helps design and test revised systems
- Keeps frontline expertise in the loop

11 End-to-end case owner

Human owns the entire customer problem, not just a single call.



- Takes responsibility from initial contact to final resolution
- AI gathers records, summarises information, tracks actions
- Creates greater task identity and autonomy

12 Multidisciplinary problem-solving agent

Uses customer insights to improve services and address root causes.



Work with:
- product development
- IT and operations
- compliance
- marketing
- service design

- Analyses patterns in customer interactions
- Works with other teams to solve recurring problems
- Moves from individual cases to organisational improvement
- High influence, learning and skill development

HUMAN AS RESIDUE — AI does most of the work
HUMAN AS DECISION-MAKER — Human and AI share the work
HUMAN AS THE CORE OF SERVICE — Human leads the customer experience
HUMAN AS DESIGNER OF THE SYSTEM — Human improves and shapes the future

Many of these options can coexist within the same call centre.
The key is to design jobs that make the best use of both human and AI capabilities.

	1. Worker Does Leftovers	2. Worker Handles Exceptions	3. Worker Decides with AI Advice	4. Worker Oversees Case, Enabled by AI
Brief description of design	AI is the primary service provider. Handles as much customer work as possible, passing unresolved cases to humans. Handles what AI cannot resolve.	AI is the primary processor. It runs standard workflows & identifies exceptions requiring human intervention. People address AI-flagged exceptions – diagnosing problems and intervening where required.	The human agent retains control of the customer interaction and final decision, using AI as an adviser. AI retrieves information, analyses the situation, summarises it, and suggests possible responses.	The worker owns the customer's problem from initial contact through to resolution, coordinating whatever input from others is needed. AI is an enabling assistant, performing information search, analysis, documentation, tracking, etc.
Stimulating	Mixed/low. Cases may be challenging, but humans face a concentrated stream of difficult exceptions. Easy successes and natural task variety disappear.	Moderate. Exception diagnosis can be intellectually challenging, but monitoring and checking can become repetitive or passive.	High potential. AI removes routine information processing while preserving human problem solving, judgement and interaction.	Very high potential. Whole, varied customer problems require investigation, judgement, coordination and creative problem solving.
Mastery	Low–moderate. Workers can become expert in difficult cases, but have fewer opportunities to learn across the full range of customer problems.	Moderate–high. Workers can develop diagnostic expertise, especially if they investigate why AI failed. Risk of deskilling if humans merely approve recommendations.	High potential. AI can supply information and feedback while humans continue exercising expertise. Risk of deskilling if agents become over-reliant on AI advice.	High. Following problems from beginning to end provides feedback, learning and understanding of cause and effect. Agents develop broad customer and organisational expertise.
Agency	Low. AI largely determines which cases humans receive. Humans may inherit situations without controlling the preceding process.	Moderate. Humans exercise judgement at specified intervention points. Agency depends heavily on their authority to override AI.	High. Human decides how to handle the interaction and can accept, modify or reject AI recommendations.	Very high potential. Human determines how to progress a case, coordinates resources and makes decisions, assuming genuine authority accompanies responsibility.
Relational	Mixed/low. Human contact remains, but disproportionately involves customers frustrated by unsuccessful automated service.	Low–moderate. Customer contact may be intermittent, although interaction with specialists and colleagues may increase.	High potential. AI handles background information processing, allowing humans to focus more attention on listening, empathy and customer relationships.	High. Sustained relationships with customers plus coordination with colleagues, experts and other organisational units.
Tolerable demands	Potentially poor. Automation removes easy cases and concentrates cognitive and emotional demands. Humans repeatedly inherit difficult or frustrated customers.	Mixed. Routine workload falls, but passive monitoring may be combined with unpredictable bursts of urgent, complex work.	Potentially good. AI reduces search, memory and administrative demands. Benefits disappear if AI is used primarily to increase work pace or call volume.	Potentially good. AI removes administrative burden and fragmentation, although case ownership can cause overload if caseloads or unresolved cases become excessive.
Effect on customer satisfaction	Risk of lower satisfaction for customers reaching humans. Customers may have already experienced an unsuccessful AI interaction and then need to repeat or explain complex problems. Quality depends on the handover from AI to human.	Mixed. Efficient for routine cases and potentially effective when exceptions are identified accurately. Satisfaction may suffer when escalation is late or customers experience discontinuity between AI and human service.	Potentially high. Customers retain human interaction and judgement while benefiting from faster information retrieval and AI support. Particularly effective where customers value explanation, discretion or rea	Potentially highest. Customers have a human who takes responsibility for resolving the whole problem rather than processing a single interaction. AI can support faster and more informed service while preserving continuity, accountability and personal attention.

Example Alternative Work Designs In Practice

Klarna changes its AI tune and again recruits humans for customer service

Over a year after claiming that its AI chatbot could do the work of 700 representatives, Klarna is turning back to people to help with customer service work.

Published May 9, 2025



Kristen Doerer
Senior Editor

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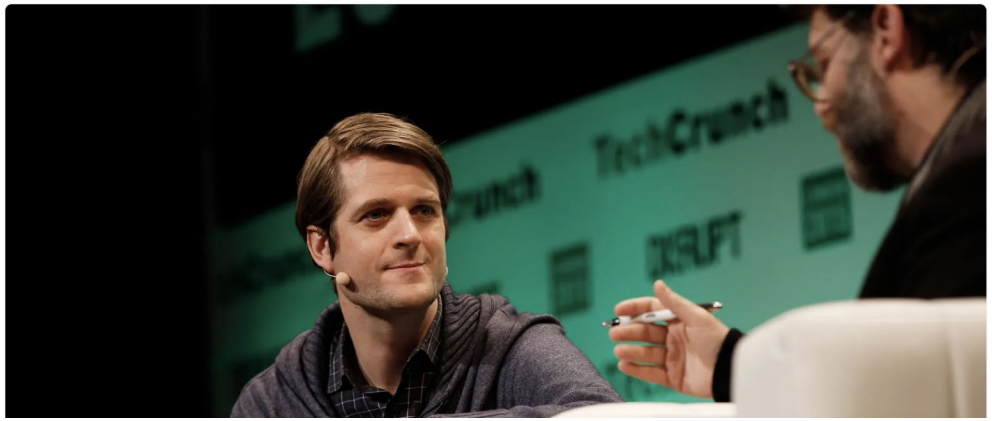




Brynolfsson et al. Productivity increased by 15%

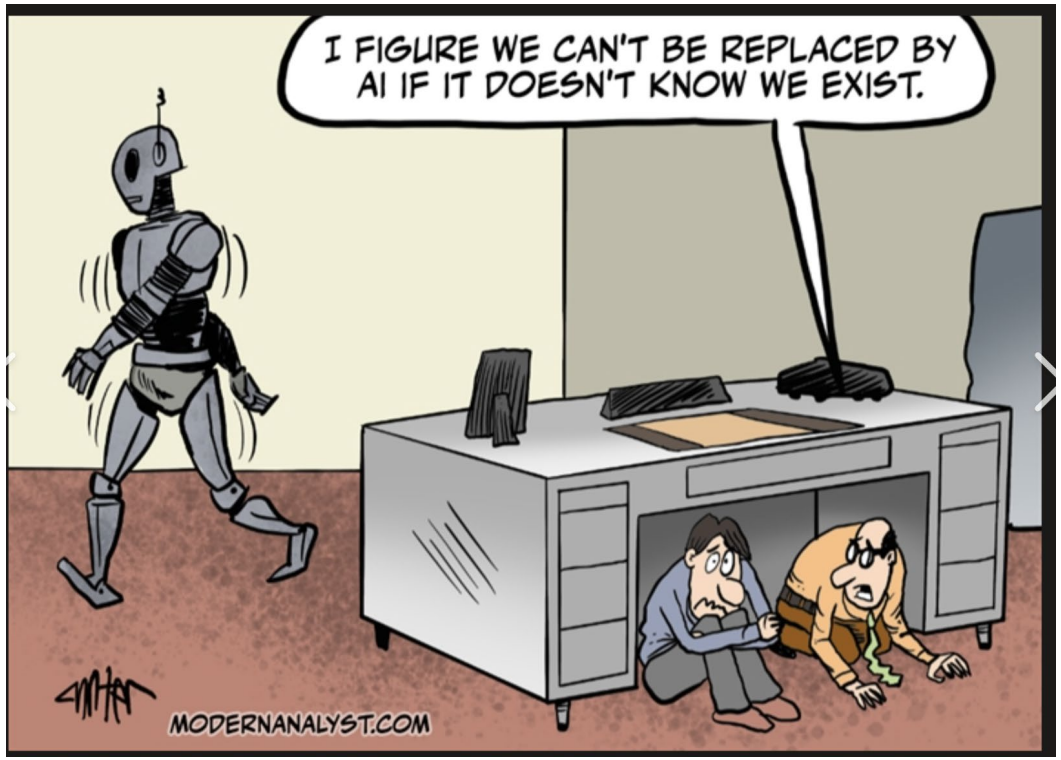
Key Learning Points & Recommendations

As Leaders/ HR Professionals…

Quality Work in a Digital Age
ARC Centre of Excellence

Curtin University

Move from "which tasks can we automate" or "how many people can we replace?" to "how can we better design the work system"

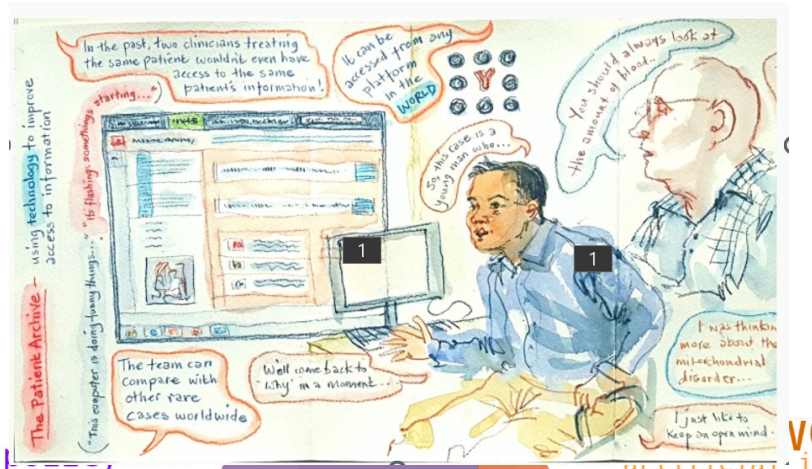




"When AI is being employed, it must be because it is the best solution for the task"
(AI Policy. WA Govt)

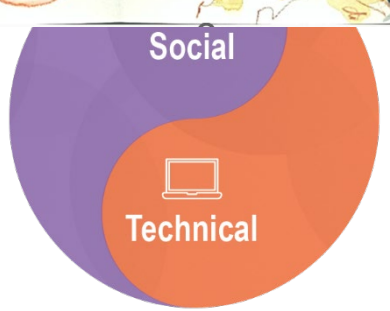
Adopt a “sociotechnical” rather than a “technocentric” approach to improving the work system

Social
A new team work design



Tech
The Patient Archive





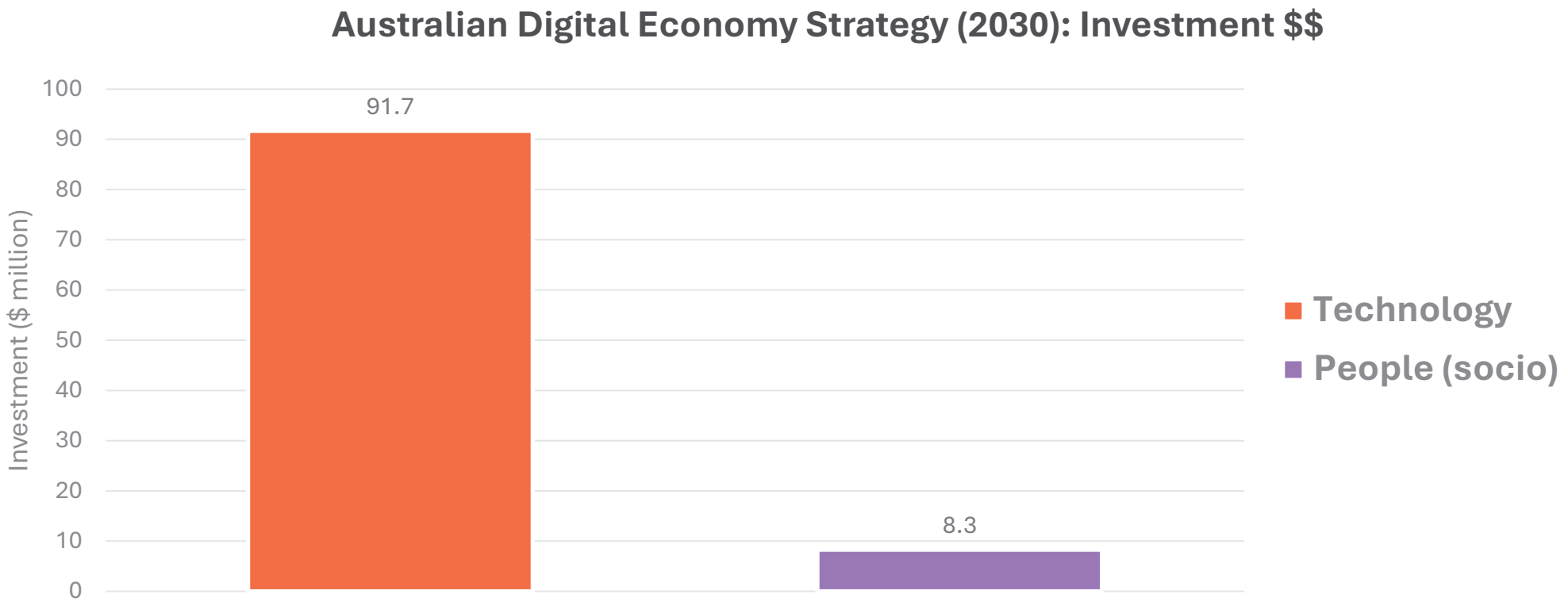


Parker, SK., Ballard, T., Billinghurst, M., Collins, C., Dollard, M., Griffin, M.A., Johal, W., Jorritsma, K., Kowalkiewicz, M., Kyndt, E., Lusher, D. McLennan, C., Miller, T., Neal, A., Paterson, J., Vetere, F., and Walsh, T. (in press). **Quality Work in the Future: New Directions Via a Co-Evolving Sociotechnical Systems Perspective.** *Australian Journal of Management.*

Quality Work in a Digital Age

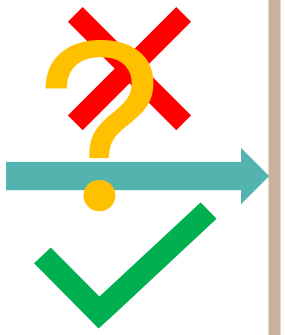
Invest in the socio alongside the technical!

"....the bottleneck is no longer technical"



Recognise that… “Technology is neither good nor bad, nor is it neutral.” (Melvin Kranzberg’s First Law of Technology)

AI / Digital Technologies



Work design

“content and organisation of one’s work tasks, activities, relationships, and responsibilities” (Parker, 2014)

S M A R T

Work Design.

Mental health e.g., depression, burnout

Motivation & performance e.g., job satisfaction creativity, core task performance, proactivity

Learning & growth e.g., skill development, use of talent

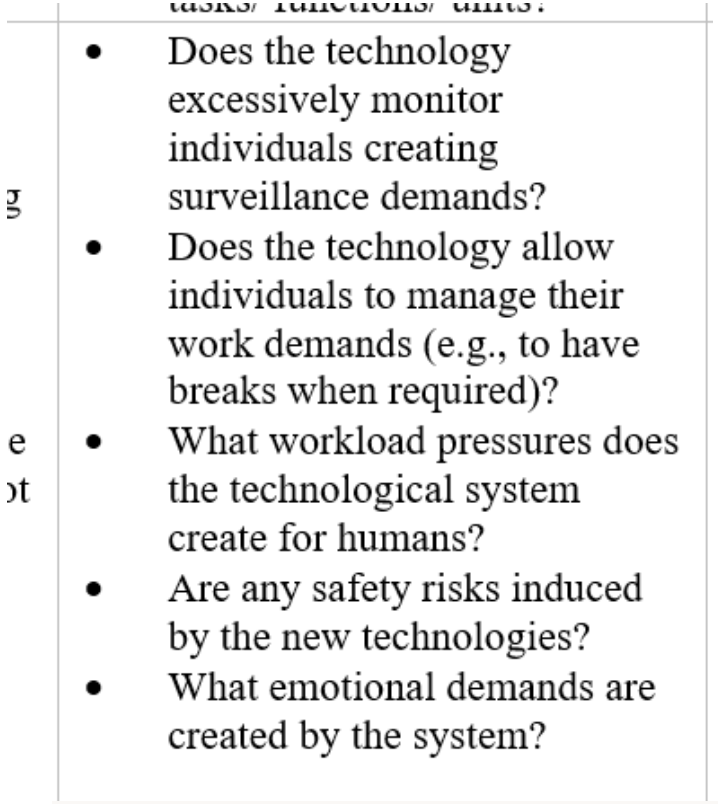
Productivity

Effective augmentation

Quality Work in a Digital Age

Actively consider and shape how AI affects work design throughout the AI journey

The SMART model can be used a part of the **criteria** when developing, procuring & deploying AI, and when evaluating AI impact



- Does the technology excessively monitor individuals creating surveillance demands?
- Does the technology allow individuals to manage their work demands (e.g., to have breaks when required)?
- What workload pressures does the technological system create for humans?
- Are any safety risks induced by the new technologies?
- What emotional demands are created by the system?

Parker & Boeing 2025

Be proactive in thinking about work design & other ‘socio’ aspects



“We’re the band-aid until the techies get there to fix things… Originally train drivers were up there with airline pilots and they were one of those careers everyone aspired to… Now we’re just forgotten, we’re the band-aids…”

De Boeck & **Parker** (under review)

Engage the people who do the work in the change process, and support their upskilling as roles shift



Five year study of retailers: Successful AI requires radical changes in ways of working, which in turn requires engaging employees in change (Bonetti et al., 2023)

Tencent Example… Wei & Fu, 2025

Open-source tech

Proactive Sociotechnical Approach to Work Design

- Proactive strategy to use tech to make work better
- UX design deeply embedded *"…We use their feedback to decide whether a product was successful or not. Employee voice is very very important" (HR mgr)*
- Iterative open learning culture

150 digital HR products across all functions (recruitment, training, benefits, etc)

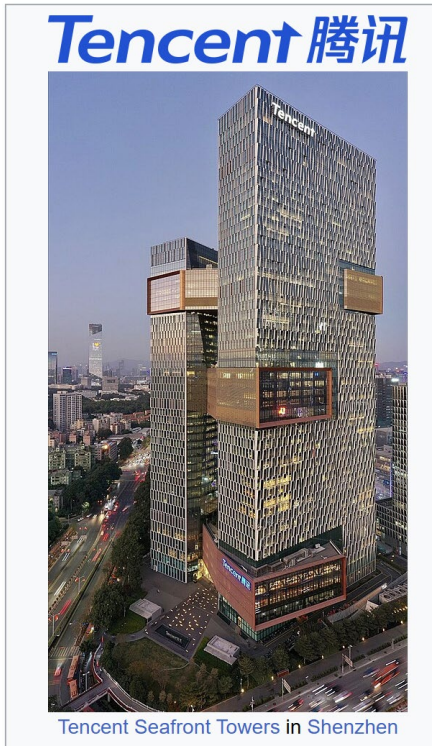
S M A R T Work Design.

Healthy & productive work

"it's like 'use and go'. The products are user friendly, they save a lot of my time" (staff member)

*"These products are not like some cold-hearted tools for us, **or something that companies impose on us**… these products are truly supporting us, not only in our work but also in our lives. (Staff)*

"Within the OKR (goal) tools, you can list your own objectives & share them with those you deem appropriate…. everyone's input and collaborative efforts can be displayed" (Staff2, Business group 1)



Tencent Seafront Towers in Shenzhen

Top ranked Chinese IT company with > 100,000 employees

Summary: In an AI-Future…

*How can we achieve **productive outcomes**?*



SMART Work Design.

Multi-party responsibility

*How can we create a **healthy & meaningful work?***

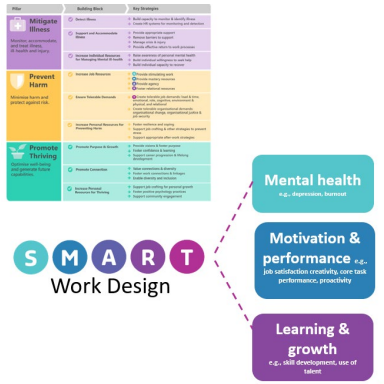




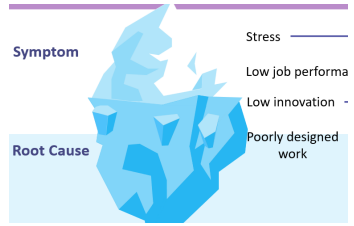
Wrap Up

Summary

Good work design prevents harm (amongst other benefits)



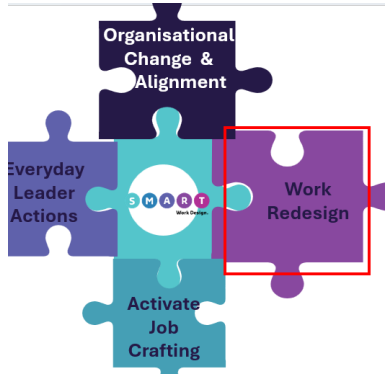
Work design is often neglected as a strategy.



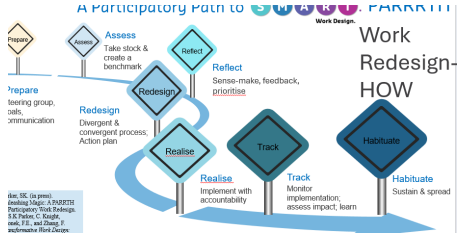
Well-designed work can be captured by the SMART model



There are many paths to SMART work, including work redesign

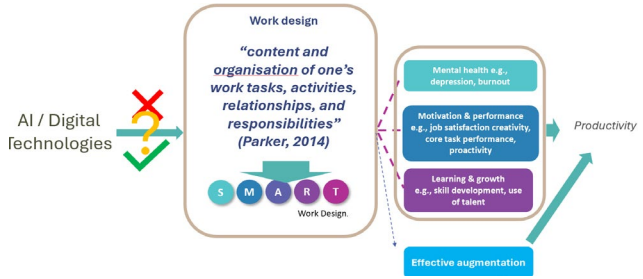


PARRTH is a way to redesign work- the key is to involve stakeholders



Summary (continued)

AI can have positive and/or negative effects on work design, but the effects are rarely neutral



A sociotechnical approach to AI – that proactively considers human work design – reduces people and performance risks



Back to SLIDO

One insight or learning from today?

One thing you would like to know more about?

Thank you!

If you would like to be on our QWIDA mailing list, scan QR code below

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