Chapter 4

People, Place, and Purpose:
Emergent Post-Pandemic Higher Education and Employment Needs in the Future of Work

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ABSTRACT

While higher ed institutions have been incorporating online learning into their curriculum and delivery of content, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for major reform and reconsideration of learning practices, especially online. This chapter focuses on the ramifications of the pandemic on people, place, and purpose in ways that will have long-lasting meaning for both higher education options and the future of work for years to come. From the form of delivery to the way in which content becomes measured, mastered, and linked to employment opportunities, the future of higher education and work will demand non-degree offerings (NDO) that align with skills gap needs to improve efficiency, speed to completion, and qualifications for jobs and/or promotion.

INTRODUCTION

With seismic changes in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the online higher education world experienced a growth and innovation explosion, particularly in the field of general education, as institutions moved to meet new demands and gaps for a workforce in flux. From skills-based, competency-based mastery transcripts and new ways to earn stackable micro-credentials both to cut down the time of completion and cost of preparation for new jobs or degree programs, online higher education providers continued to race and evolve to meet ever-shifting needs. Providers hedged their bets for best predicting the future—a world of exponentially growing technological advancement, increased need for environmental sustainability, and iterating forms of digital realities. As major employers like Walmart and Home Depot discovered changing employee preparation and training needs for interacting with the

public, online higher ed institutions found themselves in a unique position to contextualize skills-based learning in different iterations and delivery forms with new geometries of modularization, with modules as self-sustaining units of learning to be arranged, combined, and rearranged to meet the unique requirements of each learner. Personalizing the educational experience to the exact need, schedule, delivery form, and career goal for each leaner would and will become the hallmark of online higher education, as it continues to evolve and adapt to a digital platform independent of one time zone or one shared geographic, physical location.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the evolution of professional work due to three key drivers of change, 1) *People*, 2) *Place*, and 3) *Purpose*, where post-pandemic education and labor consumers communicated new, large-scale needs. Such needs included upskilling to address gaps in training for new job roles, the rapid production of essential products in short supply, the necessary proliferation of in-home or delivered, on-site services rendered (due to mandatory quarantining or social distancing), and new strategies for stress management and coping mechanisms (e.g. online counseling, mentoring, coaching) for a world of increasing ambiguity, volatility, and crisis. These three "P"s or key drivers have forced higher education providers and employers to transform, yielding to more sustainable, practical, and efficient models in the following ways:

PEOPLE: Since the pandemic, we have realized that:
1. People need a sense of connection.
2. People require creative outlets.
3. People benefit from coaching re: cognitive load management, time management, and invisible stressors of crisis.

PLACE: Since the pandemic, we have realized that:
1. Place becomes limited.
2. Place reveals excess waste & consumption.
3. Place affects social development and emotional well-being.

PURPOSE: Since the pandemic, we have realized that we need a greater life:
1. Purpose connects to a personal mission that drives change.
2. Purpose allows for imperfection necessary for innovation.
3. Purpose finds expression in created items and the bespoke.

By diversifying what has constituted general education with intentional, stackable, micro-credentials with in-demand specializations, and a portable, transferrable core that supports lifelong critical upskilling employers desire, this post-pandemic period requires a novel approach to higher education. This new approach encourages nimble, flexible, accessible forms of online programming, curriculum design, and professional training, retraining, and upskilling. In such a form, higher ed providers will become more empowered to react to learner and labor market needs, how and when needed most, as the future of work evolves to meet advancements in technology, machine learning, augmented intelligence, robotics, and virtual reality platforms.

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