THE WORK REVOLUTION

FREEDOM AND EXCELLENCE FOR ALL

JULIE CLOW Ph.D.

CONTENTS

This Thing We Call Work

Once upon a time, long, long ago, we humans made our living working the land. We labored for ourselves, and the effort we put into our work was clearly tied to what we got out of it. If we planted seeds, we'd harvest a crop. But life then was tough, often grueling. When things went well, we could see our hard work pay off—though, too often it didn't; droughts and storms and unrelenting cold weather would come along more often than we could bear, wreaking havoc on our crops and destroying all we'd worked so hard to create.

As we evolved, we became more sophisticated. We designed massive production assembly lines to manufacture everything under the sun. By now, more often than not, we worked for someone else, earning wages by the hour, which dramatically improved our economic outlook and offered security and consistency. And we took pride in our work; we could see that the wheels we built or the chassis we helped to assemble produced a beautiful car down the line. It wasn't a rich life, but we were no longer impoverished.

But, alas, we evolved again. Rather than working with our hands, we started working with our minds. Our minds dreamed up a grand new reality, one in which the world was connected as never before. We built robots to assemble our cars, developed methods to modify the crops to become more weather resistant, and invented countless ways to automate our lives and make things profoundly easier. We organized the world's information, to make it accessible simply by typing a few words into a search box, or taking a picture of an object to learn more about it. Our economic lives tilted toward the prosperous, with ever more promise of abundance. And we began to live happily ever after.

Oh wait: No, we didn't.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

You'd think we'd be happy working with our minds. We get to sit around and *think* for a living! Create ideas! Bring them to life! We have almost reached the promised land of perpetual contentment and happiness—except that we are still relegated to a dreary corporate world erected in the vast wasteland of the status quo, as so aptly illustrated and mocked in Dilbert cartoons, movies like *Office Space*, and the TV show *The Office*. Consequently, most of us now feel:

- *Overwhelmed*: We have far too much to do, too much information to process, and too many people to coordinate with. We can't keep up with it all, and we are drowning. Too-long to-do lists and overflowing e-mail inboxes are the causes of self-defeating guilt for many of us.

- "*Anonymized*": The people who put in just enough effort to keep from getting fired are treated the same way as those who go all-out—those who truly care and want to succeed, and genuinely want to create value. But their efforts are rarely recognized, so what's the point? The result? Those of us who do care tend to get buried among the masses of the mediocre.

- *Disconnected*: Ironically, the very inventions that have given us such a profound sense of connectedness are incredibly complex, and thus require unimaginably esoteric work to make them happen. The work we do now is highly specialized, buried deep within the layers of our products, and the link between our contributions and the actual use of these products is too abstract for most of us to derive any strong sense of meaning from our work.

- *Mistrusted*: We work in companies fraught with rules and policies and dress codes and scheduled hours. It feels no different from when we were in high school, except the clothes we wear now are not nearly as fun, and food fights don't break out nearly as often.

We hear a lot about employee engagement and how it is abysmally lacking in today's workforce. For example, the 2011 Employee

Engagement Report from BlessingWhite (representing 11,000 respondents globally) found that only 31 percent of employees are fully engaged in their work, and 39 percent of all respondents plan to leave their current organization within the next year.[1] Business leaders wring their hands in despair, wishing they could find the answers to solve this problem. They roll out new strategies, hire new leaders. They search for reasons—it's the gen-Y age! The economy is terrible!—so they can conveniently shift the blame when they fail to figure it out.

Meanwhile, employees have no sense of empowerment; they feel like victims in a gigantic, tragically unmovable system. I was chatting recently with my dad just before he retired (or, more accurately, was laid off, which he took as a great reason to retire). He was relaying his frustrations about showing up to do garage-door repairs (my dad has always been adept at fixing things), only to discover once again that he didn't have the right parts. He knew exactly why: The person who ordered the parts was disconnected from the people who were taking the service calls, who were disconnected from the people who were ordering different equipment for original installation—you get the picture. He could trace the entire issue from one end of the organization to the other, and back again, with astounding details and insight. When I asked him, "Dad, why don't you just tell them how to fix it?" he quietly chuckled and shook his head. His wisdom was trapped in the tiny box representing his perceived influence on the organization. I realized at that moment how lucky I was to be working at Google at the time. Not because of The Perks (free lunches, massage program, parties, etc.), but because Google knows how to operate a sustainable, positive workplace in the new knowledge economy. As an employee of Google, I could have just gone and fixed a problem like the one my dad faced.

Why haven't other organizations figured this out? Why aren't they all clamoring to make big changes? The short answer is that we are too fixated on the symptoms of problems, rather than the problems themselves. For example, productivity gurus make a very good living teaching people how to manage their inboxes and task lists. One of the most popular productivity books, in print for 10 years, is selling as strongly as ever today. I would never argue that personal productivity isn't an important skill, but it will not solve the problem of information overload! Our ability to create and access data and information will

continue to multiply exponentially, and no matter how many devices we carry and how religious we are about Inbox Zero (the philosophy and approach to processing emails each day to maintain an empty inbox),[2] we will never be able to keep up with the relevant (and not-so-relevant) flows of information. This is our new reality and we haven't yet figured out how to sustainably adjust to it.

Likewise, we hire young employees into our organizations and are shocked—shocked!!—at their level of dissatisfaction. How dare they insist on jobs that have "meaning"! We had to work hard to get where we are, and they act as if they should get it all on day one. Again, this is a symptom of the disconnect between our new global, always-on reality (which gen-Y folks know as their *only* reality) and our outdated work models. This clash isn't about gen Yers versus baby boomers and the lack of understanding in either direction; it's about the fact that we are blind to the deeper problems, and all too eager to deflect the blame.

Management fad after management fad is paraded throughout our organizations, promising the next-best fix for employee engagement and organizational productivity (though, most often, these fads can rarely be integrated into one solution). Everyone gets trained, processes are redesigned, and, then, about a year later, we revisit our problems only to realize that absolutely nothing has changed.

STARTING A WORK REVOLUTION

I am an optimist at heart, so I believe that we can fix this. Here is my Work Revolution Manifesto:

- I believe that it is possible to love your work, your workplace, and those you work with.

- I believe that it is possible to find your dream job and to excel at it, no matter how well (or badly) you did in school.

- I believe that every organization can thrive, generate more value for their customers and shareholders, and become wildly successful by sticking to the things they do the best and hiring people who belong.

- I believe the workplace isn't a zero-sum game, in which either the employees win or the organization wins, but not both; I believe that what is in the best interest of the employee is also in the best interest of the organization, and that getting this right is what leads to a thriving, profitable business.

In sum, I believe that freedom in the workplace is worth fighting for, and that every person and every organization can be excellent. When we unleash human potential, great things happen. But it's going to require loosening our death grip on control; we have to let go just a bit.

I posit that we can start the Work Revolution by implementing two, seemingly counterintuitive, strategies:

Strategy 1: Don't aim to change one organization. Change them all.

Strategy 2: Follow the easy path.

Strategy 1: Change All the Organizations

Starting a Work Revolution sounds daunting, even lofty, requiring a lucky confluence of factors. Changing any *one* organization, to swing it around from declining to thriving, is a wildly improbable prospect (as evidenced by the consultancy profession, which is booming and promises to be prosperous for a very long time). So far, few organizations have revolutionized the way they work. We have been regaled with stories of Google (which I will add to here), W.L. Gore, and Ideo, companies that have been so idealized it seems utterly impossible to replicate their successes.[3] But the fact is, these organizations *started out* with savvy and innovative management practices. They didn't have to turn around hundred-year-old legacies. That is why we see so many shining examples of start-ups that are able to launch with thriving, healthy, organizational cultures.

Consequently, what I'm proposing is *not* that we change at a rate of one organization at a time. It may seem counterintuitive, but if we aim big, if we try to change *every* organization, we just might be successful. How is that possible?

Jonni Kanerva is a software engineering manager at Google. He also happens to be one of the best managers I've ever worked for. He took me under his wing when I joined the Engineering Education (engEDU) team. During his tenure there, he carefully crafted a brilliant teaching methodology to delve deep into the core of this mysterious thing we call *innovation*. His innovation learning series, Ideas to Innovation (i2i), became wildly popular at Google. One of the concepts, in particular, stood out for me: It was a brainstorming exercise he facilitated with teams. He would start by having teams think about a big goal they were working toward. Articulating this goal was sometimes quite hard to do; but, he explained, it was important to boil it down to a simple problem statement. He would then ask the team to *multiply the problem by 100*. In other words, if they thought about solving the same problem, but 100 times bigger, what would they do? Of course, this little thought exercise required people to think about their problem in an entirely different way. It reframed it so that they were no longer obsessing about the details— the ins-and-outs, the minutiae of the work. It pulled them back and forced them to think at a completely different level and solve for the problem in truly novel ways. Now *that* is innovation.

That is our task at hand. If we shift from thinking about changing our current organizations to changing the entire *world of work*, what would that look like? It would *not* entail diving into organizational theory or organizational design. It would *not* involve changing out leaders or implementing a new training initiative. It *would* require a complete rewrite of the rules, a complete rethinking about the way we work, everywhere.

THE TALE OF THE START-UP

Jessica Lawrence, Managing Director of NY Tech Meetup,
Freelance Writer, and Speaker

At the start of a company's life, everything seems magical. The founders are best friends, the happy sound of employees playing Ping-Pong fills the air, and an office fridge well-stocked with beer purrs quietly in the corner. Start-ups are often looked to for inspiration; they seem to

epitomize the ideal company, and provide a stark contrast to the old, slow, outdated, risk-averse, joyless large companies that many start-up founders quit in search of a better life.

The truth, though, is that every company in the world began as a start-up. At some point, all companies were staffed by a couple of people without much more than fresh ideas and a lot of passion, who were always smiling because they were exercising their autonomy in building something that was truly their own.

This image of the start-up is an idolized one. On the surface, start-ups look and feel different from older, larger companies: They are staffed by people who are more energetic, innovative, optimistic, open-minded, and willing to take risks. And while many of these attributes are accurate descriptors, much about how people actually work and are managed in start-ups is hardly different at all from mainstream companies.

A start-up typically begins with a couple of best friends who share a dream. As new employees are hired, new rules, habits, and structures are put in place, leading to a relatively quick regression into the type of management many people feel most comfortable with: "face time."

Although start-ups may have a culture of innovative thinking, their work and management practices do not necessarily reflect that. The start-up culture is largely based on face time—teams huddle together in an office space, hunch over computers, and often work long into the night and on weekends, to build their dream company. Working all the time is the only acceptable behavior at these companies, because at each stage in the start-up life cycle there is a perception of urgency that is driven by multiple forces.

Initially, a start-up faces the pressure of being first to market. It competes head-to-head with other companies working on the same idea, and first-to-market "wins." The start-up's employees work as many hours as humanly possible, in the same physical space, to make the collaboration process as quick and seamless as possible.

Once a start-up receives funding, the urgency comes from a different source—the investor wins or loses based on the success of the company.

(continued)

(continued)

The start-up founders now feel the pressure of pleasing an investor. I've heard tales of some venture capitalists calling or e-mailing start-ups at 10:00 or 11:00 o'clock at night as a test to see how quickly they respond.

During these phases of growth, start-up founders often face significant hurdles, and suffer depression and burnout, though very few openly admit it. They worry that revealing the toll that their unbalanced work life is taking on them will paint them as weak to current and/or future investors. They feel pressure to appear tough and be willing to brave anything to get the job done.

At first, working 80 hours a week in their own company feels different to entrepreneurs than working 80 hours a week for someone else. Many start-up founders seem to know what they are signing up for when they jump in, but that knowledge does not enable them to become superhuman overnight and continue to function well in the long term, in the high-pressure, high-demand environment of a start-up.

Although the habit of overworking in a start-up may feel different than overworking for a big, old company, its long-term effect is no different. Worse, it establishes habits of behavior that get passed on to new employees, and eventually become part of the new company's culture. Without intervention, start-ups are at risk of falling into the same patterns as the large companies they sought to counteract in the first place.

Strategy 2: Follow the Easy Path

Change is hard! It requires grit and determination! Blood, sweat, and tears! Right?

Wrong. My premise is that change is not only possible, but that it is easy. Think for a moment about doing something you love, something that comes easily to you but that may be hard for other people. Recall the feeling you get when you are in your groove—you might work long hours, but the time flies by, as you are swept along by the energy generated by the extreme satisfaction you get from what you are producing. This is called *flow* in positive psychology terms.[4] Martha

Beck lays this out brilliantly in her book *Finding Your Own North Star*,[5] as well as her follow-up *Steering by Starlight*,[6] and I believe these principles can readily be applied to organizations.

When you love what you do, and feel like you fit like a glove in your organization, *everything* becomes easy—in the sense that things come together almost magically, wins come fast, and energy remains high. When an organization focuses teams on the things that they are perfectly positioned to do, everything clicks! Customers come pouring in, and the results are far and away better than those of any competitors. Forcing things, pushing things along, making things happen by brute force—this all sounds noble, but in the end, it wastes energy and time, and is most often a signal that you are headed in the wrong direction.

We are so accustomed to the principle of hard work (especially in America, where we were founded on the Puritan ethic of noble suffering) that we have completely overlooked the notion that *easy* often points the way to *right*. Because I am a behavioral scientist by training, I am careful not to expect change when the desired behaviors are hard, unless you significantly alter the environment and put a lot of time investing in positive reinforcement of these behaviors. Fortunately, all the principles that underlie the Work Revolution are built around this notion of finding the "North Star"[7] both for individuals and organizations, pointing the way to the ultimate state of flow. It is appropriate then, that we embark by first making the change from work *force* to work *flow*.

Tying together strategies 1 and 2, the crux of the Work Revolution is thinking big and keeping it simple. The book *Influencer: The Power to Change Anything*, states that we often look at big problems and make the assumption that they require big solutions.[8] In fact, big problems sometimes can be solved very simply using small solutions that have powerful leverage. In *The Work Revolution: Freedom and Excellence for All*, I will stay true to the big ideas while religiously seeking ways to make change easy.

THE THREE CHANNELS OF CHANGE

Fred Kofman, author of the must-read book *Conscious Business*, defines the idea of *unconditional responsibility*.[9] If you say, "I can't be happy in my work because my organization is too bureaucratic," you are choosing

to be a victim. To be a victim is to be a spectator and completely give up power. While it might be soothing to blame all of your ills, injustices, and bad results on external factors outside of your control, this renders you unable to make any changes and, thus, become part of the solution.

If, however, you choose to be a player (the opposite of victim) and claim "response-ability," then you focus 100 percent on the factors that are within your control. You are saying, "I can make a choice on what to do, given that the world has presented me with this situation."

If we all showed up at work taking 100 percent responsibility (not to be confused with *blame*), then we would all be empowered to be part of the solution. As a player, Kofman states, "There's always something I can do. I am free to choose how I respond to this. . . . When you are a player, there is no 'they'; if anything bothers you, then it's your problem."

So the first step—or, rather, the prerequisite—in the Work Revolution is that everyone, individuals and leaders alike, step up to respond to the problems of their organizations. Change can happen when individuals, leaders, and their teams line up to each take 100 percent responsibility. Some books are written *about* organizations— how to design an organization, create a vision for an organization, or merge two organizations. Other books are written to help leaders perform better at their jobs. Still other books are written for individuals to help them reach their full potential. *The Work Revolution* is written for all three audiences.

Individuals

When all is said and done, most of us devote 12 hours a day getting ready for work, getting to/from work, and, of course, doing the work itself. And this is assuming you don't spend additional time answering e-mails at night, reading work-related articles on the weekend, and putting in overtime at the office or at home. Why should we be okay with living a miserable work existence when it consumes so much of our time? And given that our identities are so closely aligned with

what we do, why wouldn't we want to be glowing with pride about our work?

To go back to the commentary on generational differences, I've become fascinated with the growing community of gen Yers who refuse to succumb to subpar working lives. Here are a few examples:

> Jenny Blake, author of *Life After College: The Complete Guide to Getting What You Want*,[10] writes a blog of the same name, serves as a life coach, and makes her living doing the very thing she was born on this planet to do, which is to help every other human on this planet find their true potential and *go after it*. She's 28 years old.

> Charlie Hoehn, author of the e-book *Recession-Proof Graduate*,[11] assures graduates that companies that won't hire them because of their inexperience aren't worth working for. His premise is that graduates should volunteer, take on projects they love, and prove themselves as worthy hires to the innovative companies of the world that are using cutting-edge job-seeking strategies. He's a thriving entrepreneur at age 26.

> Jamie Varon graduated from college, landed a great job (or so she thought), and had an "early-life" crisis after exactly two weeks of work. She quit, started her own business, Shatterboxx,[12] doing website design (she's self-taught), and moved first to Rome and then Paris, where she's living her dream life at the age of 26.

> The list goes on and on . . .

How is it that each of these amazing, but quite young, individuals has figured it out in their twenties? Frankly, for whatever musings there might be about gen Yers being "entitled," that attitude has led to their having absolutely no patience for the ridiculousness of corporate lives, and they are opting out, in droves. They are optimistic that they can do the things they are passionate about, and can make money at it. Fortunately, what starts in the younger generations spreads upward to their elders, as evidenced by the former's immediate Facebook adoption, and the subsequent accelerated adoption by older age groups (Figure 1.1). We *all* need to become more entitled. We need to insist on a work life that is fulfilling and fun.
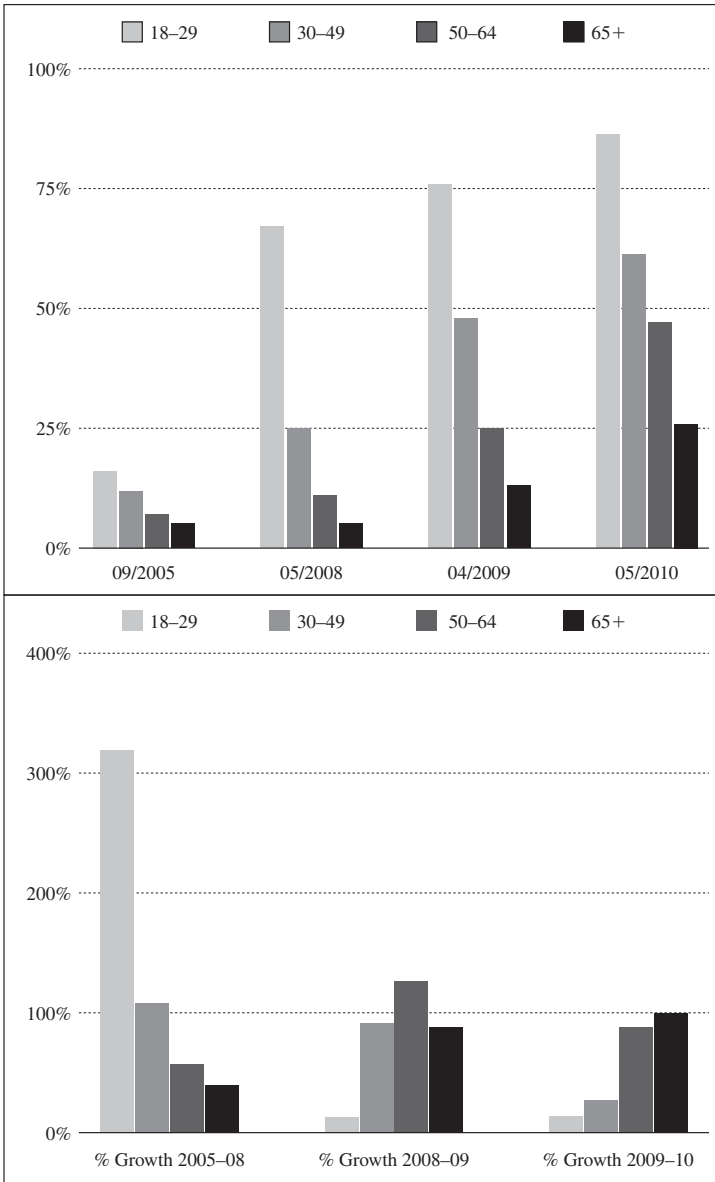
Figure 1.1   Adoption of social media by age. The top graph shows the percentage of the population using social media. The bottom one shows adoption growth year over year.
Data Source: Mary Madden, "Older Adults and Social Media," August 27, 2010; http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Older-Adults-and-Social-Media.aspx.
Illustration: Brian Lanier

As individuals, we might posit that we work for companies that are behind the times, inflexible, or impossibly conservative. You might even work for the government, in which case this is surely true. But you still have a choice. You can show up to work today and do everything in your power to create your own sense of freedom in that environment. Even if you can't knock down the inflexible pillars of organizational bureaucracy, you can stake tiny little tents of initiative and plant grass-roots ideas throughout the organization.

Each of us, as individuals, can do things now, in our current roles, in whatever workplace we happen to be in, to make changes that will result in our own personal happiness.

Leaders

Leadership: This topic alone is responsible for a preposterous amount of shelf space at the few brick-and-mortar bookstores still in existence. Every organization grapples with developing its leaders. Leadership classes are chockful of information so "fluffy" it might as well be coming from horoscopes. Aubrey and Jamie Daniels, in their book *Measure of a Leader*, boil down leadership to my favorite definition: The most vital indicator of positive leadership is "the percentage of individuals volunteering discretionary effort" in the organization.[13] Simple as that. Put another way, how many people on your team go above and beyond their job responsibilities *just because they are inspired to do so*? If you were to create the perfect team, this is exactly what you would want from every member. But before this definition can be implemented, we have to make a few assumptions:

- Individuals have the freedom to initiate their own work.

- Individuals are inspired by work they believe is meaningful.

- Individuals see the impact of, and are rewarded by, the work they do.

So, of course, while the definition is simple, it is not trivial to carry it out. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try. Wouldn't it be

rewarding to know that you have contributed to the core happiness of individuals on your team, by making their working lives better? And wouldn't it feel even better to know that your efforts contributed significantly to the organization's bottom line? To quote again from *Measure of a Leader*, "The energy requirements of the leader increase in direct relationship to the decrease in the commitment of the followers." Simply put, your job gets easier, and requires less energy, as you become a better leader. Plus, the payoff is much more gratifying.

As a leader of a team—perhaps a manager or a supervisor—it is certainly valid to point out that you are literally caught in the middle between what Barry Oshry, in *Seeing Systems: Unlocking the Mysteries of Organizational Life*, refers to as the Tops in the organization, who want everything done, and the Bottoms, who want to do nothing.[14] But you are a *leader*, and you can fashion your team any way you want. When your team successes start becoming obvious, your approach will eventually meet with wide regard and appreciation, and eventually be copied with zeal.

Anyone who shows up as a leader in any context, whether as a temporary leader for a short-term project or the full-time head of a division, can, with new principles in mind, lead a team of engaged and excited employees.

Organizations

Do you want your company to survive? Fun fact: As of 2003, the average S&P 500 company had a lifespan of 25 years. Fast-forward to today: The average company lifespan is down to 10 to 15 years![15] Okay, that's not really a *fun* fact. But if your organization doesn't start creating a fun work environment, it will become one of those statistics. Note that when I say "fun" here, I don't mean that you should set up a carnival atmosphere and let people play all day. What I mean is, when individuals are tapping into their deepest potential and doing work that is meaningful to them, they will see their work, and the challenges at hand, as fun. I also mean that you should be working hard to create an environment where people can poke fun at themselves, share

a laugh with each other, and play an occasional game of Ping-Pong, pool, or Foosball.

> "I've mentioned the idea of using the word *play* to replace the word work. If you have no way to feel playful doing your work, get different work."
> —*Martha Beck, "News from Martha Beck Inc.," April 2010*

When your employees can show up at work, know they have a voice, feel empowered to make things happen, and have fun doing it, you will have created an environment that fosters innovation and ensures that you stay agile to meet the constantly changing demands of the business environment.

Whether you are a unit leader, on the board of directors, the head of human resources, or even the CEO, you can plant the seeds for culture changes, sponsor initiatives that spawn grassroots contributions, and persist in moving the company in the right direction through the decisions that are in your span of control to make. If you have any influence on the design, culture, or operations of an organization, there are fundamental changes you can make in policies, processes, strategies, and culture, to create a better environment.

TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

Starting a Work Revolution requires that individuals, leaders, and organizations take action; all three groups are critical to its success. This book articulates the rules most of us are following today in our jobs, the reasons they no longer work, and what we can do instead. For each new rule, you'll find simple steps that every individual, leader, and organization can take to make those changes now.

But before I talk about the new rules, pause here to gauge the health of your organization today—to establish a baseline, if you will. After all, once you have fully realized the changes brought about by the Work Revolution, it'll be great fun to go back and have a laugh at the "before pictures."

GOOGLE: MY INSPIRATION AND MUSE

I finished graduate school in the summer of 1999 and entered the workforce naïve and optimistic. I expected to be as excited about work as I had been about school, which I always loved. It was quite a letdown, though I don't think I ever fully voiced this at the time. In the first seven years of my career, I sampled work life in a wide variety of organizations, since I served in a consultant-type role. I generally enjoyed my work, and I was far from miserable; but I did feel constrained and limited by the bounds of the corporate life. It was hard to spread my wings and feel like I could really make an impact.

In 2006, I made the big leap to move to California and join Google. I spent the first two weeks looking over my shoulder, waiting for someone to tell me to fill in a timecard, asking what work schedule I planned to keep, or putting other constraints around my time. This never happened. Consequently, I felt a complete sense of autonomy over my work and how I did it. It was pure magic.

During my tenure at Google, I continued to draw inspiration as I reflected on how the work environment at the company utterly changed me. I was free to pursue work that I believed would have the greatest impact. When the work actually did contribute value, I was rewarded with promotions and bonuses. I explored a variety of roles on different teams during the five years I spent there, and when I made the very difficult decision to leave Google in 2011, I left feeling enormous gratitude for the friends I had made and the rich perspective I gained about organizational culture.

I moved on to a wonderful opportunity to start up a learning and development function for a very cool nontraditional financial company in New York (my dream city). The new company is every bit as innovative as Google in its management approach, and so I felt completely at home there, from day one. I could never go back to a traditional corporate environment.

Throughout *The Work Revolution*, you will find plenty of examples from my years at Google, where I collected valuable experiences and

(continued)

illustrative stories. I have endeavored to deconstruct Google's management practices to make them accessible to everyone and every organization. I am not suggesting that all organizations can, or should, become another Google; what I am saying is that you can shape your organization to have Google-like qualities, which I have distilled in this book.

I admit, Google is my muse and inspiration, but even Google is not perfect. No organization is. Nevertheless, we can strive to make our organizations great places to work, and that requires nothing more than an insistence on optimism and a determination to do everything in our control to make it happen.