

The strategist's bookshelf

Nine key forces reshaping the workplace

Gregory Gimpel

Gregory Gimpel teaches digital innovation at Georgia State University where his research focuses on the intersection of emerging technologies and digital business transformation. He previously served in senior management positions (ggimpel@gsu.edu).

The Nine: The Tectonic Forces Reshaping the Workplace by Phil Simon (Racket Publishing, 2023), 270 pages.

Beginning with the Great Recession – late 2007 to 2009 – businesses have faced a new era of significant macro forces – economic, technological, political; social and demographic – that present significant challenges and afford vast opportunities. The global pandemic of 2020-2023 catalyzed many slow-moving trends to make them mainstream, if not ubiquitous in business. Recent technological inflection points brought emerging technologies from experimentation and niche use to maturity and widespread implementation. Within this environment, managers and business leaders find it difficult to keep track of, let alone make sense of, the many forces that are changing their business landscape. There is no shortage of management books written by respected researchers and built upon careful analysis. Likewise, many publications provide in-depth guidance on how to deploy specific technologies within an organization. The available information can be overwhelming. When it comes to understanding the confluences of forces impacting business and organizations, many are asking: where to start? Phil Simon's *The Nine: The Tectonic Forces Reshaping the Workplace* provides an overview of potent systemic factors and technological advances that managers need to consider when

managing their people or running their business.

For consultants and change managers, the book will not present much novel information. For those too busy running the day-to-day operations to stay on top of business trends and emerging technologies, as well as for people beginning their business careers, *The Nine* offers an easy-to-read encapsulation of many important trends and technologies and can provide an important base of knowledge. It offers a starting point for those wanting to recalibrate how they manage people or run an organization. The book consists of nine chapters detailing different forces driving today's organizational and competitive changes, followed by a final chapter with advice for navigating the path forward. The nine forces can be viewed as five macro trends and four potentially transformative technologies. The trends are employee empowerment, remote and distributed work, systemic inflation, shared services and assets. The technology-based forces are blockchain, process automation, generative AI, data analytics and immersive technologies such as virtual reality. Each chapter explains one of the "forces," offers illustrative examples and presents the author's prediction for how the trend or technology will shape the future workplace.

Easy reading

Simon employs an easy-to-read, conversational style to provide

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context needed for readers to understand what drives current changes to the workplace and the way we do work. Short case studies help concepts seem real and tangible. The writing is straightforward with a matter-of-factness that may motivate people to confront the emerging world instead of waiting for it to revert to an idealized past.

The author adopts a deterministic perspective, implicitly arguing that because a technology or macro-trend exists the associated risks and opportunities will more than likely arise. This perspective allows for clarity in explaining the potential impacts of complex concepts and technologies; however, it trades nuance for communicative efficiency. Technology and sweeping societal trends almost always have strong forces pushing back against them, not just driving them forward.

For example, Chapter 3: “Physical Dispersion” discusses the very recent phenomenon of employees’ outright refusal to return to office buildings. The chapter’s assertion that the future of work will consist of a mixed mode of work, in which employees split their time between the company office and their home offices, is probably accurate. The chapter, however, highlights the motivation employees have to work from home while largely disregarding the powerful drivers motivating individuals to return to an office environment. One powerful counter-driver to the remote work trend comes from the young people who will enter the workforce in the next several years. On the whole, the

next generation workforce is experiencing unprecedented loneliness and feelings of social isolation[1]. In-person office interactions can alleviate much of this isolation, creating a powerful driver for a generation of workers to want to work in an environment in which they are surrounded by a consistent stable of colleagues.

Similarly, the chapter about immersive technologies describes a wide array of technologies. Awareness of these technologies may benefit readers, but the book offers few clear business use cases. While presented as inevitable technological advancements, whether some will become tectonic forces reshaping the workplace is unclear, and in some cases unlikely.

Reader benefits

The book provides an easy-to-understand overview of factors about which every manager, business leader and business school student should be aware. Because the chapters are focused on specific concepts, it makes it easy to get up to speed in the short windows of time people can find in their busy schedules. Overall, the book aggregates many of the conversations about technology and market disruption often discussed in the financial and business media and makes it available in one place. However, this book does not provide a fulsome understanding of the various technologies and macro trends presented – that is not the

book’s purpose. That would take nine separate books, rather than this one book in which the chapters span a broad collection of topics.

This book provides foundational knowledge to provoke thought and initiate meaningful conversations. It is not a book for those familiar with trends and new technologies who seek specific guidance on how to reshape their workforce. Its target reader is not someone seeking a roadmap to building specific policies and formulating precise strategies. The book does not provide specific steps or action plans for navigating through the inevitable turbulence of change.

Rather than providing maps or navigation tools, in closing, Chapter 10: “Navigating the Path Forward” imparts the advice to acknowledge rather than ignore the forces of change and to embrace rather than fight them.

Big-picture takeaway

The Nine provides a consolidated information source for those who want a basic foundation of the trends and technologies that are reshaping business practices. It provides a useful first read for people who need a better understanding of contemporary technological and business trends.

Note

1. S.E. Jones *et al.*, “Mental health, suicidality, and connectedness among high school students during the COVID-19 pandemic—Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey, United States, January–June 2021,” *MMWR Supplements*, Vol. 71, No. 3, p. 16, 2022.