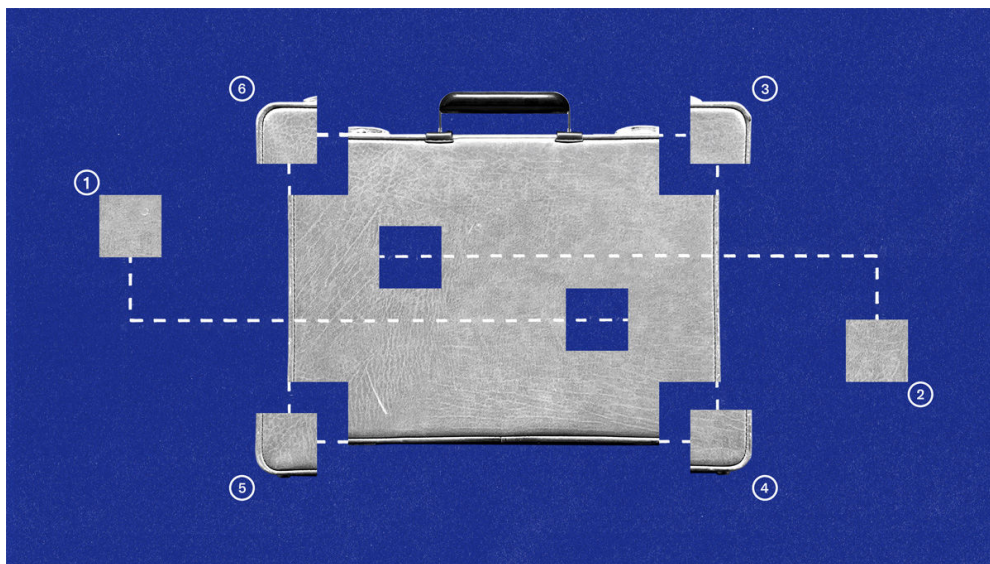**Digital Article** / Teams

How Deconstructing Jobs Can Change Your Organization

Matching employees' skills with specific projects, rather than confining them to fixed roles, can help unleash people's talents. But companies need to deal with three tensions to make it work. *by Philip Rogiers and David G. Collings*

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The centrality of traditional "jobs," or stable tasks bundled into administrative job titles, is waning in modern workplaces. Amid post-pandemic labor shifts, global uncertainties, and rapid technological advancements, organizations are pivoting toward more flexible work structures. This shift is epitomized by "job deconstruction," a new way

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of organizing where employees' skills are dynamically matched with specific tasks or projects rather than through fixed roles.

Job deconstruction represents a broad range of approaches to redesigning work and manifests along a continuum. More radical approaches seen in companies like Zappos are structured based solely on temporary functional roles, completely eliminating traditional job titles and hierarchies. This bold approach represents a complete reimagining of organizational structure.

In the middle of the spectrum, organizations like Unilever are piloting hybrid models. Their U-Work program enables select employees to work flexibly across projects without fixed roles, while retaining the benefits associated with permanent positions. This approach provides Unilever with agile, in-house talent socialized into the organization and familiar with internal processes, mitigating the costs and integration challenges of external freelancers.

Most common, and less radical in terms of change, are organizations that offer deconstructed job opportunities as complements to full-time roles. Internal talent mobility programs in DBS bank, Schneider Electric, or the U.S. federal government exemplify this approach, allowing employees to take on cross-departmental side projects alongside traditional job roles. These initiatives facilitate skill development, network expansion, and career growth while employees maintain their primary roles.

With job deconstruction emerging as a potentially transformative organizing principle for enhancing talent deployment across organizations, its implementation is not without challenges. To better understand these challenges, our recent study focused on identifying the key tensions that arise when organizations implement

deconstructed jobs. In our investigation, we drew upon our experience as researchers and consultants working with organizations piloting job deconstruction globally, and analyzed case studies and company reports documenting job deconstruction initiatives across a diverse range of Fortune 500 companies and public organizations.

Tensions in Deconstructed Jobs

We uncovered three key tensions inherent in deconstructed jobs that, if left unchecked, risk alienating employees and fail to deliver the benefits of job deconstruction.

Balancing autonomy and control.

While job deconstruction initiatives are designed to empower employees by enabling them to choose tasks that align with their skills and interests, this is a real threat to managers' authority. We saw numerous examples of managers hoarding talent and other forms of managerial resistance to deconstructed jobs, which seriously undermine the effectiveness of such approaches. For example, in the U.S. government's Open Opportunities initiative, managers regularly resisted employees' attempts to pursue deconstructed jobs in the form of side projects, expressing concerns about whether employees had capacity owing to their primary roles and questioning why these employees would prefer to work with people in other departments.

Our conversations with leaders trialing job deconstruction in a technology consulting firm also revealed that while deconstructed job opportunities are presented as voluntary and employee-driven, employees' participation is increasingly used as a way to demonstrate commitment and is often factored into annual talent discussions. This creates tensions between employee autonomy and performance expectations: While participation is supposedly voluntary, it becomes a de facto requirement for career advancement; yet managers often expect employees to maintain full focus on existing responsibilities.

By forcing interested employees to pursue new opportunities on personal time rather than as part of their standard workday, the system undermines the very autonomy it claims to promote.

Balancing detachment and belonging.
While detaching from the constraint of job structures can create opportunities through enabling internal mobility, this detachment can create interpersonal challenges for employees who may feel they no longer neatly fit and belong as they work non-normatively in an organizational hierarchy.

For instance, our in-depth interviews conducted as part of an ongoing study with employees in deconstructed jobs revealed that these workers' contributions are often discounted by coworkers who view them as a threat to established team structures. Although members of the same organization, these boundary-spanning employees were often perceived as outsiders when entering new work groups or departments — making them vulnerable to resentment and exclusion.

We also saw that while the most adaptable employees could effectively navigate and sustain such challenges, others, especially employees who were already more vulnerable to microaggressions, retreated to the perceived safety of established relationships and structures, limiting their engagement with job deconstruction.

Balancing growth and stability.
While deconstructed jobs can enable employee growth through new work opportunities, the instability associated with these new work forms can challenge employees who are not particularly open to change. Across the initiatives we studied, we found that while confident, high-performing individuals actively seek opportunities, other employees often cling to the stability of predictable jobs.

This means we saw a dual internal labor market, divided between those actively seeking progressive self-improvement and those held back by uncertainty and self-doubt. For example, a separate study of more reticent employees revealed that these employees often recreated rigid job boundaries — a psychological "golden cage" — seeking to retreat in the comfort and certainty of traditional jobs, even as their organizations formally deconstructed job boundaries.

Guardrails to Manage Tensions

To navigate these tensions, we identified three key guardrails to support the introduction of deconstructed jobs while balancing employee interests and well-being.

Protecting against excessive managerial control.
To balance control and autonomy in deconstructed jobs, organizations should consider interventions to establish new managerial norms around deconstructed jobs to counter talent hoarding, the pressure to work beyond normal hours, and increase leader buy-in. The Open Opportunities program developed several successful countermeasures: Employees' activity in deconstructed jobs was formally recognized as professional learning and development opportunities and pursued during regular work hours, while C-level executives provided visible endorsement. The initiative further built support through managerial success stories and targeted educational outreach to local managers. Crucially, managerial champions actively supported their employees' participation by easing control over their time and building their capacity to take on incoming deconstructed work assignments, thereby establishing cross-functional mobility as the new workplace norm.

Further, to structurally cement this cultural shift around deconstructed jobs, organizations should consider contractual adjustments, where formal employment contracts validate workers' independence in selecting and executing dynamic tasks or project portfolios — reducing

the influence of a single manager. For instance, the pioneering Free Agents initiative in the Canadian government established entirely new positions for employees in deconstructed jobs, enabling them to move across departmental boundaries contributing to immediate project needs. This maintains people's employment benefits while explicitly protecting their right to find and leave projects in cases of a lack of fit.

Shielding against exclusion and poor fit.
To counter the risk of exclusion in deconstructed jobs, organizations should explore and perpetuate ways to actively value individuals operating beyond conventional job structures. Developing novel project matchmaking criteria and flexible identifications founded on skills and temporary team fit, rather than rigid job titles and fixed group membership, can help break organizational tribalism and personal bias in hiring, creating a more collaborative and flexible work environment.

The transformative potential of skills-based, fit-focused project staffing is exemplified by Talent Cloud, a pioneering staffing initiative in the Canadian government. Central to its success is a five-factor matching model that enables informed, self-directed matchmaking by using explicit project skill requirements, applicant qualifications, manager characteristics, team culture, and work environment. Managers articulate their vision for team composition through structured questions and narrative responses, while candidates showcase their abilities, interests, and identity through digital credentials and self-narratives. This comprehensive matchmaking approach empowers both parties to assess project fit before commitment, reducing misfit and exclusionary dynamics.

The results speak for themselves: Talent Cloud maintains a 95% organizational retention rate among participants, with 80% choosing to continue working with their original teams.

Buffering against instability.

Finally, organizations must be sensitive to the inner worlds of employees and how they experience job deconstruction initiatives. Theories of social defense show that emotions, such as fear of change and instability, can hamper the adoption of new ways of working. Successful job deconstruction initiatives should thus recognize the psychological uncertainty of working beyond stable boundaries. This can be managed through gradual implementation and closely monitoring worker experiences and challenges. Such measures are vital to avoid a bifurcated labor market where fears hold a significant part of the workforce back.

Resources and networks for support and collaboration can further help employees throughout the transition to deconstructed jobs. For instance, both Mastercard and Spotify actively support the organic emergence of "guilds" — communities organized around similar skill specializations — enabling employees to connect across business units, build shared purpose, and learn from collective experiences. Structures like these serve as anchors, offering both a sounding board and a space for employees to connect with others within the fragmented reality of deconstructed jobs.

The Human Experience of Deconstructed Jobs

By challenging the centrality of "jobs" and replacing them with flexible skills matching, job deconstruction promises workforce agility to help companies adapt and thrive amid near-constant change. However, as companies adjust job roles and requirements, leaders may lose sight of the human experience and risk failure. As the tensions identified in our research highlight, there is a thin line between empowering and displacing workers in this new world.

To truly enable workforce potential and retain critical talent, job deconstruction initiatives must place human experience front and center. Recognizing that organizational structures are not simply mandated but enacted and brought to life by individual workers is critical. To avoid implementation failure, the erosion of worker support, and the persistence of institutionalized job patterns, leaders must embrace this sensitivity and implement targeted interventions to manage and mitigate tensions. Only with the right guardrails in place can deconstructed jobs shape more resilient, adaptable, and humane organizations.

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