**John Howkins** is a leading figure in the global understanding of work, innovation and creativity, shaping business and government policy in Europe, China and South America. He is the author of the seminal *The Creative Economy*, which has been translated into 14 languages. He was previously chief adviser to HBO and Time Warner and chair of The London Film School, CREATEC, Tornado and BOP. John is a member of the United Nations Advisory Committee on the Creative Economy, and in 2006 the Shanghai government set up the John Howkins Research Centre on the Creative Economy. He is in wide demand as a speaker and adviser on creativity and innovation, working with individuals, start-ups, companies and governments.

Praise for *Invisible Work*

'Fresh, original, powerful, profound and deeply practical. John Howkins makes visible the essential contours of working in a transforming world. If you want the secrets to a successful and satisfying life, read this book.'

Jeremy Hunter, founding director of Executive
Mind Leadership Institute

'John invites us to discover a world of unseen possibilities. In an age of "invisibilities", he masterfully helps us understand that those who carry out the actual job of delivering creativity and innovation are the cornerstone of defining our modern world.'

Felipe Buitrago, co-author of *The Orange Economy* and
*The No Collar Economy*

'John Howkins' books have proven clairvoyant; this new book is no exception. It is a must-read for innovation leaders. The seismic shift towards invisible work demands CEOs, entrepreneurs and managers rethink how to lead teams whose heavy lifting happens in the mind. John's book gives a roadmap for understanding and navigating this new landscape.'

<div align="right">Alice Loy, CEO and co-founder of Creative Startups</div>

'This wise and inspiring book shows us the true meaning of work in the 21st century ... Essential reading for anyone in pursuit of a more productive and purposeful life.'

<div align="right">Paul Owens, founder and chair of BOP Consulting and director of the World Cities Culture Forum</div>

# INVISIBLE

The Future
of the Office is
in Your Head

# WORK

## John Howkins

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# PREFACE TO NEW EDITION
# COVID-19 – THE GREAT DISRUPTION

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted almost every kind of work. Millions of people who had always gone out to work were suddenly asked to stay at home and work there, if they could. Offices were abandoned and high streets were empty. It was the most abrupt and total change to working life ever known and a shock to many people's routine, income, identity and friendships.

We began to think about work, *our work*, as never before, as individuals, household by household and company by company. Online suddenly became the new normal or, as I prefer to say, the new temporary, one of many to come. The psychological impact is still unclear, but the consensus is that people coped surprisingly well if their work was cognitive and nomadic, and they had a good life/work balance. They became pioneers of a new way of working. Others struggled because of the nature of their work or their personal circumstances or perhaps their employer's attitude.

We became more aware of the *relationship between us and our work*, which in turn affected the *relationship between us and our company and our company's office*. Speculation about the future of work switched from the nature of automation and its effects on jobs to personal freedom and autonomy and the role of work in our lives.

Trends that had been barely noticeable were suddenly mainstream (such as cognitive agility and hybrid working). Many said the pandemic had accelerated existing trends rather than revealed new ones.

Before the pandemic, many regarded working at home as a little quirky, if not self-indulgent, and not for them. The proportion of office workers who expected to work more often at home in the future was around 10 per cent in 2019. Within six months it rose to nearly 70 per cent. A Cisco survey of 10,000 office workers, *Workforce of the Future*, reported a staggering 87 per cent of workers wanted to be able to choose whether to work from home or in the office, and manage their hours, even when offices open up. The numbers are likely to fall back as offices re-open but they will surely not fall back to 10 per cent. The future is coming closer.

Change often starts slowly and then gathers pace. Since writing *The Creative Economy* I have spent 20 years talking with individuals and companies around the world about the nature of work and particularly work that increases the prospects for creativity and innovation. Everyone I talked with had their own approach (which can be irritating to colleagues) but they do share some distinctive characteristics.

Their starting point is seeing work as a personal endeavour and not just a job. They believe that being given a job and doing it on someone else's terms is unlikely to be interesting or produce good results. They like a challenge, are self-motivated and not averse to taking charge when necessary. They don't always ask for permission; doing so can take too long and the magic moment may disappear. Anyway, permission might be refused; better not to ask.

They accumulate their own cognitive toolbox from an early age and add to it throughout their lives. It's stored in their brain and they cannot imagine being without it.

Working like this has two great advantages: it is more rewarding to the person doing it and more valuable to the company.

The pandemic has not reversed these trends or cancelled these advantages. Rather it has made us more aware of them. It has speeded up the forces for change and added a few twists.

We had to rethink our work arrangements. The default was to set up a workspace at home that mimicked our office workspace and to stick to current tasks as best we could. I call this office-lite.

And then there was a mind shift which was summed up by Fast Company's headline, 'Figure Out How You Want to Work'. We realised we are free to redesign our *work* and have the kind of *office* we want.

The conversation widened to include all work, both paid and unpaid. Households with children had to take on working, caring and teaching roles, juggling paid work, housework and homework, which raised questions of equality and gender roles.

We talked more about personal and practical issues such as trying to work when alone, how to make a mark wherever we are, and hours and pay. The millions of young people leaving school and university and looking for their first job ask the most basic question: how do I start? The result is a conversation in every household and every country with a range and urgency it has never had before. This reflects the book's theme that work is a humanist endeavour as much as an economic activity, and Peter Drucker's insight that work is about humans creating more value for other humans.

In this new edition I have added new sections on working from home and online, as well the effects on offices, and on the private nature of cognitive work. I have written more

on company culture. I have added Ten Rules of Invisible Work but I am in favour of Rule Ten, which suggests you make up your own.

Doing invisible work at home is an experiment in the future. I don't mean that in the future everyone will work at home, but something more far-reaching: a new relationship between us and our work, our office and our company.

*Invisible work* consists of a person's personal, private thoughts that relate to their work and which, for many, are the most critical part of what they do and the reason they are paid. It is the heart of creativity and innovation. Taking charge of and communicating it to others can make the difference between success and failure.

The good news is that in spite of breaking most of the conventional assumptions about work, it is accepted as work and paid as work. The pandemic made this evident.

Artist Bruce McLean describes it as, 'The not discussed, not remarked upon work. Work with no meaning as yet. Work that is self-questioning. Work that is not possible to document.'[1]

The spirit of invisible work isn't new. Richard Irish's 1973 book *Go Hire Yourself an Employer* captured its message in the year Steve Jobs dropped out of college. It's about using one's brains and taking charge. But its scope is far greater.

When I talk about it, people say, 'Oh, I've just done some invisible work today.' It's all around us, hiding in plain sight. This book shows how to recognise it, and how to thrive in a world that now depends on it.

*John Howkins, December 2020*

# 1.

# EVERYWHERE
# AND NOWHERE

## The Choice

You walk into a meeting or you join online. Your instinct is to look around for clues about what others are feeling and thinking. You notice the funky table and chairs, and you feel comfortable but also a little nervous about what's going to happen. You check out the other people and their devices, although you know anyone looking at you would have no clue what you are thinking. The meeting starts but no one asks you to speak and, when you do, no one listens. You know a bit about what's being said but other people chip in more quickly to make obvious points, easy wins, and you have no startling contribution to make and the discussion moves on. You wonder how to break through. On the surface, it's fine but you can't get below the surface. Suddenly the meeting breaks up. What a waste of time. You're invisible. You can't go on working like this.

Start again. You walk into a meeting or join online. Your instinct is to look around for clues about what others are feeling and thinking. You notice the funky table and chairs, and you feel comfortable but also a little nervous

about what's going to happen. You relish being left alone to think. You're in charge. You're invisible. It's called freedom. You're free to think and say what you want. You know a bit about what the others are thinking and what they might say but you don't like a meeting to be predictable and prefer to adjust what you're thinking as the conversation develops. You play around with various things to say, rapidly changing your ideas, deciding what is negotiable and what is not. Most of them aren't that important, achieving tactical positions rather than strategic wipeouts, but you relish delivering the ones that are, at the right moment. Good meeting. See you soon.

Some of the most critical things we do at work are invisible. Turning up is noticed. Going to a meeting and saying hi, that's noticed. But the *thinking* that makes the difference between success and failure, and adds the most value, is invisible. The *decision* to go to the meeting or to finish a report or talk to someone you badly need to talk to – *that* cannot be seen. The feeling of what's right cannot be seen.

The visible differences between cognitive success and failure are microscopically small.

Some people seem to have an aptitude for this. Everyone is sitting round the same table, so to speak, but some people seem confident that they are at the heart of the action while others behave as if they are on the sidelines.

## Zig Zag

My first job as a teenager was the 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. overnight shift in the Watford Gap motorway services area on the M1 in the Midlands, and my second was the daytime shift at Linnell's grocery warehouse for small corner shops in

Northampton. I was delighted to be paid for doing something so simple and I liked my new mates: it's a gift to be cheerful at 2 a.m. or after lugging down another box of groceries.

Looking back, I realise there was a good reason why those jobs were so easy. I could see what others were doing and copy them, and they could see when I needed help. These same reasons also made them boring, and so after going to university I joined Lever Brothers, part of Unilever, and became a brand manager.

After two years there I walked away because the focus on brands and sales was too narrow for me. In spite of giving me status and money, the company cared not one whit about who I was or wanted to be.

So I decided to follow my own interests in city design. I had grown up in and around an old market town. But life was moving on. Surely the look and feel of future neighbourhoods would be, should be, different? I was inspired by Ian Nairn's books *Outrage* and *Counter-Attack* and the ambitious designs of C. A. Doxiadis. I went back to school at London's Architectural Association to do an MA in urban design.

This led me to Stewart Brand and *The Whole Earth Catalog*, which was inspired by the ideas of Buckminster Fuller and spurred on by Brand's own success in persuading NASA to release the first image of the earth as seen from space. It declared, 'We are as gods and might as well get good at it.' It was both lifestyle guide and sales catalogue. I joined *Friends* magazine (later called *Frendz*), an offshoot of *Rolling Stone*, which wanted help with the British edition of the *Catalog*. Then I was offered a job on *Time Out*, a radical news and listings magazine, to write about books and TV.

I found myself in the *ideas business*. Our work was about what we knew and how we phrased it and communicated it

to others. It was brain work and we did it when and where we wanted.

We never knew when ideas would come, and we kept our work private until we decided we wanted to talk about it, or a deadline was imminent. A lot of the chat was informal and fuzzy and often we gave few signs of work being done. Sometimes, of course, it wasn't.

My work was becoming *invisible*. My ideas began to expand beyond the job requirements which, I realise now, is an early symptom of invisible work. It was still a job in that I was employed, given a desk, paid and taxed, but my work had changed from being public and observable to being private and unseen. I began to ask myself about the nature of thinking-as-work. About people who think for a living.

A friend who has known me for a long time said she never understood what I was doing. I realise now she meant she couldn't visualise it.

## What Do We Want to Do?

Why do we get up in the morning? Money is a big incentive. Is there also a sense of responsibility? If so, to ourselves or other people? Is it a sense of pride, perhaps? What do friends and family expect us to do? What do we actually do? What do we want to do?

When I ask people, they reply in two ways. The most common is the conventional checklist of a good company, a good boss and nice people. Money is always on the list, and often the main or only reason why someone works, although it is seldom mentioned first. And there is the question of whether the job suits them personally. This is tougher to answer because it is about their private life and what they

find interesting and meaningful, and these change as our lives develop.

It's partly about being happy. According to American research company Wrike, as many as 54 per cent of British workers and 58 per cent of American workers have taken a pay cut to accept a job that 'made them happier'.[2]

But happiness is a lightweight matter. We can be happy doing nothing. Recurring Gallup polls show what we really want. The top criteria for two-thirds of all adults are a sociable workplace and good pay. These two are closely followed by meaningful work, the chance to work flexible hours and a convenient location.

What is relevant for invisible work is that each time the total sample is subdivided by age, education or income, the priorities change in favour of more private, subjective matters. For younger and more educated people, personal qualities and meaningful work move up to the top of the rankings.

For young graduates, *three aims* recur. One, a *purpose* to identify with and give support to. Two, the *autonomy* to make decisions on how to contribute to that purpose in our own way. Three, the *opportunity* to *nourish* our personal qualities and talents.

When we get to the office, it can be hard to know if the people there are working at all and, if they are, if their work is going well or badly; let alone meet those three criteria. We may know in general but not in any particular case, here and now.

I often go to a digital agency which I have known well for many years. I see people at their desk or in the meeting room or walking around but it is impossible to deduce what they are working at. I see a few new faces. I notice one person has moved to another space but there is no clue as

to whether this is deliberate or incidental. Once I saw a new table. I am clutching at straws.

We all do the same kind of things: we peer at a screen or sit around a table and talk, or walk to and fro between doing these things. Visit a city centre café and it is hard to tell whether people at the next-door table are speculating about a colleague or plotting a new business or comparing holidays. They're probably doing all three. The evidence, hiding in full sight, is that their work is invisible.

This is increasingly taken for granted. Speaking of Facebook's new HQ at Menlo Park, known as MPK20, Lori Goler, the company's head of human resources, says 'No one pays any attention to how much someone is working or isn't working'.[3]

So when a friend tells you what she's doing, you wonder when did she start to do *that*? And *how*? Did she get *permission*? We've all heard the dismissive remark made to someone who is thinking hard: 'You don't look as if you're working!' We often don't know ourselves. Ask me what I was thinking 30 minutes ago and I might not be convincing at all. The person who knows exactly what they're doing, and why, and can communicate it clearly to others, is rare.

These people work differently from others. They are work-shy yet prolific, reluctant to follow rules and yet agile. Doing things on their own invisible terms. They seem to have more ideas and be more successful at getting their ideas across.

I first noticed this trait in people who are creative and innovative. I call it a 'trait', which is a nondescript word, but it can appear in many different guises, such as inclination, talent or skill, and even a routine, a habit.

But I soon realised it is not limited to people who have a reputation for being creative, whether the Big Creativity of art and invention or the Little Creativity of making a

small change to something for the better. It is as much about responding to other people's creativity, whether a game-changing design or an amusing funny post, as being creative oneself.

It is about using cognition and feeling as the core part of one's work. It is personal and subjective. It happens whenever we use our imagination to deal with a task that is intangible and subjective in ways that are also intangible and subjective. Throughout the process, all the decisive moments are invisible. I call it 'invisible work'.

How we handle this absence of evidence is at least as important as how we manage everything else about our work. It is more important than being well-informed or clever or working long hours.

Katherine works like this. She is newly promoted as a digital marketing manager and has had to rethink a lot of what she had taken for granted. She is juggling two or three frameworks: her old job, her new job and her nascent ideas about what the company could do in the future. She is at that exciting stage of a new job when she is thinking not only about her own work but what the whole company could do better.

She finds it exhausting and lonely but not in a bad way. She roves around the office to discover what others are thinking. Then she retreats inside herself to muster her own thoughts. This moment of abstraction, and it usually is just a moment, is the nub of her work.

Tom used to hold regular team meetings to brainstorm ideas. He would book a room for one or two hours and encourage everyone to be disruptive and challenging. He wanted the meetings to be enjoyable, and usually they were, but increasingly senior managers began to stay away and Tom himself became a little bored.

So he started the next meeting in the usual way but after half an hour he broke it up and said everyone should take a 24-hour break and then, if they wanted to, meet to continue the discussion. He had no idea what people would do. If they were not interested, that was fine.

Throughout the day and the following morning, the ideas flowed. People were able to be themselves and manage their own thoughts in their own way. Some had used the five-stage process described later as CIDER (see page 101). Tom called it an 'invisible meeting'.

Some people have always worked this way, setting their own agenda, managing their own thoughts, coming and going, but they were the exception. They were treated as outsiders, and not always in a complimentary way. What has changed is a growing awareness of thinking-as-work.

## Creativity is Not Enough

It has had multiple names. Innovation. Information work and knowledge work. It has given rise to the attention economy and the experience economy as well as the network economy and wired economy. Recently, there has been greater recognition of creativity and the creative industries. These are all examples of invisible work.

The decisive moments – the moment of creativity, the calculations of innovation – are all invisible. But it has taken some time for the nature of this, and its impact on the rest of work, to come to the fore.

Forty years after coining the term 'knowledge worker' Peter Drucker said such people are 'almost impossible to control'.[4] For a man whose reputation rests on his understanding of management that might seem a risky phrase.

But Drucker always told the truth and that is why he is still respected and read. He meant knowledge workers do not fit within current ideas of management so we need new ones.

Others describe knowledge workers as being highly individualistic, putting their own interests alongside those of the company and, let's admit, sometimes a little higher.

Like Katherine, they are holistic. They take a broad view; everything is grist to their mill. They may hold strong principles that are invisible to others. That by itself would make control difficult. They 'have to have autonomy', said Drucker.[5] They like to be discretionary.

They have a talent for curiosity. They take pleasure in knowing things for their own sake, whether or not anyone had asked them to find out. They find new ways of putting their personal stamp on their work and making it more valuable (I cover this later in my Four Circles model, page 75).

The knowledge economy depends on invisible work. So does the creative economy. Their greatest value comes from the power to conceptualise, interpret and convey subjective ideas. Power is concentrated in those who understand more and communicate their perceptions with more feeling.

So being a knowledge worker is not enough; nor is creativity, by itself. What else is needed? The people doing invisible work are like private detectives – slightly secretive, intuitive but logical, and opportunistic. They have to be entrepreneurs in taking responsibility for their ideas. They are design thinkers. Digital nomads.

Human qualities of reputation and trust are more relevant than knowledge; a reputation for summoning up the right idea at the right moment, here and now.

We can distil all this into a few points. The heart of invisible work is the *purposive use of cognition and emotion*. Like all work, it is an *action*, a process. It requires

inclination, skill and determination. And, like other work, *it can be done well or badly.* It is open to being learned.

We progress by means of a continual switching between private abstraction and public and visible communication. To succeed at invisible work we learn how to choose when we should draw back the curtain and let people look in. We are impresarios of our own ideas.

The rewards can be great. When done well, it *adds more value* than visible work and, as a result, is *better paid.*

From being a small part of a few people's work, it has become the major part of most people's work.

Why has it become so widespread? It started with the growth in university education, which provokes and stimulates curiosity and gives credence to scepticism and open-ended debate. Graduates aspire to jobs where they can use their brains and take charge of their own ideas. Millennials demonstrate this clearly in their attitude to work as an intrinsic element in their lives which often outranks traditional family ties and attitudes.

It has been given wings by the shift from manufacturing to services which now provide over 80 per cent of output in Britain and 70 per cent in America. The ubiquity of digital media encourages everyone to have their say, endlessly. Companies compete vigorously by paying more for new ideas and perceptions and for people who can discriminate and manage ideas.

The creative industries provide only 15 per cent of jobs directly. But they are powerful role models for many people who do not see themselves as creative but want to work in the same spirit and to benefit from their talents and insights.

This favours small, agile companies that focus on a single speciality where they can add the greatest value. They tend

to work as clusters of talents and specialist skills. They sub-contract as much as they can.

Economists use the term 'added value' to describe an input or a process that increases the value of something. It's about making a change for the better in ways that can be identified, if not always precisely measured. It often starts with invisible work.

It is now being nudged in new directions by the rise of data, algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI). These constitute a different kind of invisible work. The future of work depends on positive co-working between invisible human work and invisible AI work.

Invisible work is the hidden ingredient of all this. It is tempting to call it a secret ingredient because outsiders may not see or know how it is done.

Why, if so widespread, is it so little known? The first and obvious reason is that it is invisible. It is also a negative. That's a double hindrance. Another is that it is personal, if not private, and subjective and difficult to pin down. Being invisible is to be ambiguous; neither good nor bad.[6]

There is a more insidious reason. Mainstream talk about work, especially the future of work, has been hijacked by economists who like to talk in terms of employment and jobs in general (as do governments). They talk about the number of jobs rather than the quality of work.[7]

They have a bias towards full-time employment, although this is a diminishing proportion of jobs today and an even smaller proportion of the total amount of work that goes on. Their theories act as filters and blinkers which hide the reality of daily work.[8]

For example, young people's apprenticeships work well in conventional industries with stable full-time employment, but struggle in industries with large numbers

of self-employed and part-time workers. Government attempts to promote them, often by industry levies, usually fail. Britain's TV and film producers say apprenticeship levies are not 'fit for purpose'.[9]

So I began to search for information about the disappearance of work. I didn't mean work was becoming less common or petering out. The opposite is true: work is becoming more, not less, important and pervasive. But it is receding from view, becoming lost to sight.

I found countless advice on jobs, leadership, management and being an entrepreneur; and on how to be creative, innovative and successful. I found books on how to set up a company and how to run a company, and numerous opinions, books and research reports on digital, social media and AI. But there are very few books on *work* itself, whether done by an intern or CEO, even though work is the basis for everything they do. It is everywhere and nowhere.

This book describes invisible work and shows how to do it. It is for people who want to be free to think what they want and then get it done. It looks at work from the inside out.

It is for people who feel their current work is not fully appreciated and don't know how to make it so, while others seem to do so effortlessly. Maybe they find it hard to seize the moment to talk about their new wizard idea. Maybe they are introverts in an office of extroverts. Or feel their contributions, big and small, are not being appreciated.

It is for people like David, an ambitious environmental scientist, who wants to make a difference but doesn't want to go to pointless meetings.

And for Kate who finds that the company's day-to-day goings-on, both important and trivial, keep interrupting her and stop her from having time to think.

And Mo whose invisible work as a vlogger turns her personal life into revenue; and for her agent who has to know how to negotiate the best merchandise deals on YouTube and Instagram.

It is a handbook for a new way of working. It investigates the surprising qualities of invisible work and shows how we can manage them to develop our own ideas and promote them successfully. It shows how to take charge of invisible work when it is private and personal, and how to manage the process of making it visible. It indicates when to be invisible and when to go visible.

The future of work is going to be a noisy and confusing place, but it is likely that few tasks will be the same in five or ten years' time. Whether we are in the gig economy or a corporate manager, whether invisible work is all we do or just a small part, it is set to be a defining element in the future and the most robust in the face of AI and climate change.

We will find it hard to thrive on our own or in any company unless we understand invisible work.