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Should You Return to In-Person Office Work? How Aristotle Can Help You Decide

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Context (I)

Just weeks after returning to the office, many Apple workers are unhappy and ready to quit

BY CHLOE BERGER
May 3, 2022 1:17 AM GMT+8

MONEY | Opinion 0

Shaky Wi-Fi, a stained blazer, forgotten lunch: Going back to the office was harder than expected

Getting ready for the office — and spending the day there — feels like a monumental task.

The 3 'biggest mistakes' companies make with return to office, according to Google's head of Workspace

Published Fri, Apr 8 2022-9:55 AM EDT

Deborah Childs: How the return to the office will affect workers' mental health

Deborah Childs | The West Australian
Fri, 6 May 2022 2:00AM | [Comments](#) | [+](#)

Why Amanda is hoping flexible work is here to stay



WORK

The Worst Part of Working From Home Is Now Haunting Reopened Offices

BY ALISON GREEN MARCH 28, 2022 • 5:50 AM

The sky-high cost of returning to the office

After two years of remote work, spending a day in the office can be a shock to the wallet — and rising costs are making it worse.

Employee monitoring software became the new normal during COVID-19. It seems workers are stuck with it

ABC Science / By technology reporter James Purtill

Posted Fri 6 May 2022 at 2:30am, updated Fri 6 May 2022 at 7:15am



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Context (II)

Elon Musk tells Tesla staff to return to the office or 'pretend to work somewhere else'

Posted 5h ago, updated 1h ago

MONEY | Opinion



Whole Mars Catalog @WholeMarsBlog · Jun 1, 2022

Replying to @elonmusk

hey elon a lot of people are talking about this leaked email, any additional comment to people who think coming into work is an antiquated concept?



Whole Mars Catalog @WholeMarsBlog

Elon to Tesla team: no more remote work

Tesla. This is less than we ask of factory workers.



Elon Musk ✓

@elonmusk

They should pretend to work somewhere else

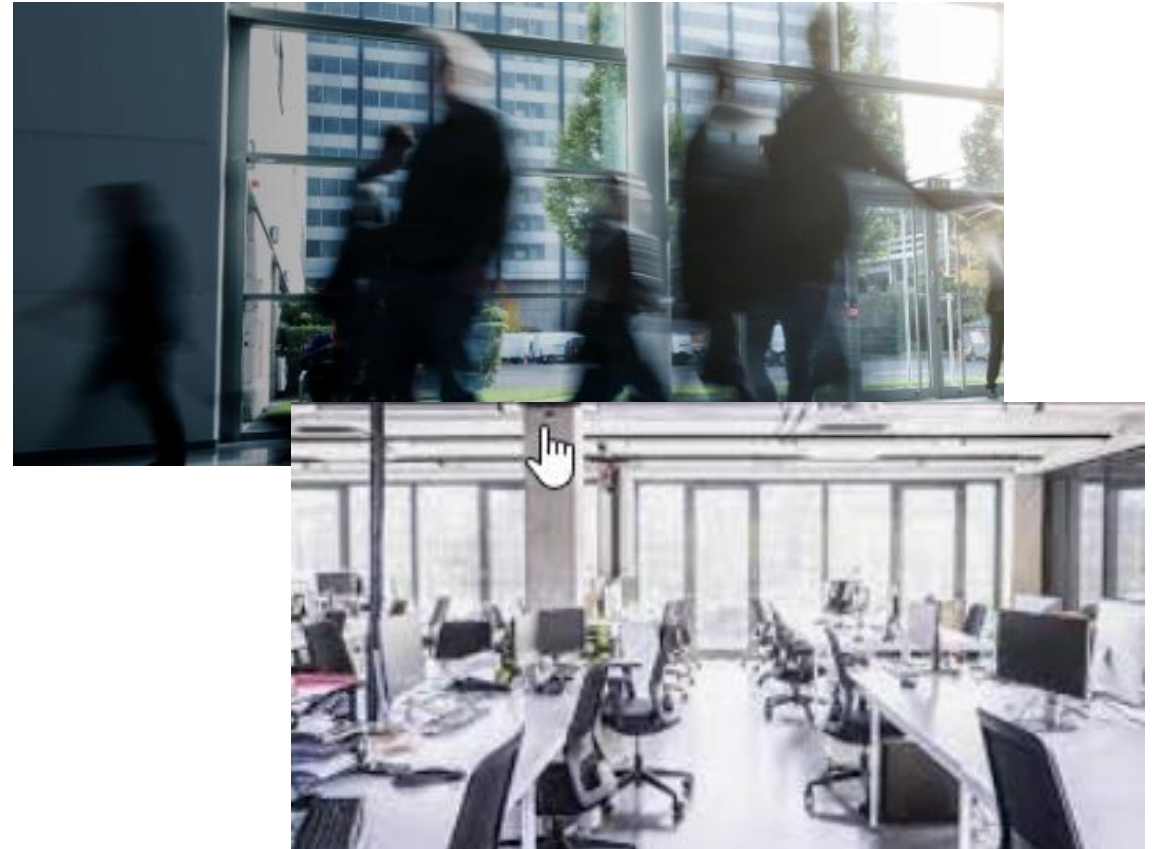
1:15 PM · Jun 1, 2022



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Agenda

- Background and current directions
- Some reasons for disparate views
- The current range of alternatives
- Issues with current alternatives
- Aristotle and the purpose-focused approach
- Steps in the purpose-focused approach
 - Examples
- Empirical questions
- Public policy implications
- Advantages of the purpose-focused approach



Background

- Covid-19 impacted work arrangements significantly
 - Much 'white collar' work shifted from office to home
 - Heavy reliance on technology for communication and document exchange
- Increasing vaccination rates and a desire for normalcy have prompted calls for a return to the office
- Responses amongst employees *and* employers have been mixed
- Typically, employer decisions about a return have been ad hoc and inconsistent
 - Disparate approaches and incomplete justifications

We propose a decision-making method oriented towards business purpose that is systematic and repeatable, and encourages constructive organisational culture



Current directions

- The issue is being navigated by large corporations in real time and in the public eye
 - Apple – three days in office, rejected twice by employees
 - Google – directed return but revised under employee pressure to three days in office, two at home
 - Facebook – supports remote work
 - Twitter – supports remote work
- Employee preferences about whether and how to return to the office are similarly inconsistent
- Employer positions are changing quickly and often



Sundar Pichai ✓
@sundarpichai

The future of work at Google is flexibility. The majority of our employees still want to be on campus some of the time yet many would also enjoy the flexibility of working from home a couple days a week...

9:04 AM · May 6, 2021 · Twitter Web App

1,484 Retweets 322 Quote Tweets 15.7K Likes



Some reasons for disparate views

Employers

Employees

Favouring return

- Closer staff management
- Encourages teamwork
- Sunk facility investment

- Separates work and home
- Socialisation benefits
- Clearer communication

Opposing return

- Little productivity data
- Reduced real estate costs
- Attractive to staff

- Saved commute time
- Less direct supervision
- Ability to complete chores

Such reasons ought not to be decisive

- Decision-making that begins with mere opinions and a list of dissimilarities between options brings significant problems
 - Arguments from self-interest make the matter personal rather than methodological
 - Focuses is on *particular* issues and interests rather than generalisable approaches and shared opportunities
 - Encourages disagreement rather than constructive dialogue
 - Whose issue is more fundamental or important? Why?
 - How should issues be ‘traded off’ against others?
 - No single method (or issue or language of last resort) that unifies or decides amongst diverse perspectives

The current range of alternatives (I)

Option 1

Return to
the office
(once safe)

- 'Pick up where we left off'
- Proven and familiar means of work
- Space, equipment, procedures etc. are in place

BUT

- Ignores preferences of employees who favour remote work
- Consequent impacts on morale
- Ignores productivity benefits amongst remote staff
- Diminishes potential to reduce office space and costs

Alternatives taken from Cappelli, Peter. 2021. *The Future of the Office: Work from Home, Remote Work, and the Hard Choices We All Face*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Wharton School Press.



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The current range of alternatives (II)

Option 2

Make
remote work
permanent

- Continue accruing benefits of remote work
- Agreeable to many employees
- Might be the realisation of a new paradigm founded on electronic information exchange

BUT

- The benefits are not matched with costs
- Not agreeable to all employees
- Not appropriate or readily implementable for all work types

The current range of alternatives (III)

Option 3

Hybrid
combination
of remote
and office
work

- Appears to maximise preference satisfaction amongst all parties
 - Mediation between employee and employer interests

BUT

- Requires analysis of impact on organisation as a whole
- Likely to lead to resentment where preferences cannot be met
- Appropriate arrangements require significant analysis

The current range of alternatives (IV)

Option 4

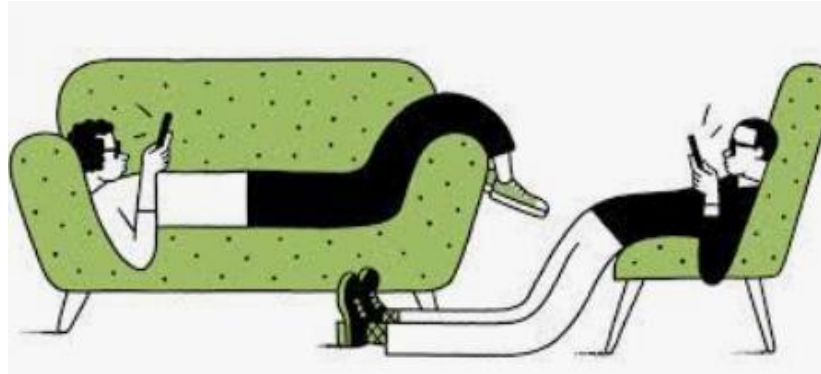
‘Wait and see’

- Ability to learn lessons and follow examples from ‘market leaders’
 - Benefits in terms of equity and perhaps recruitment

BUT

- There might not be time to wait
- Lessons might be inconsistent and unhelpful
- Who are the ‘market leaders’? Leaders in what regard?

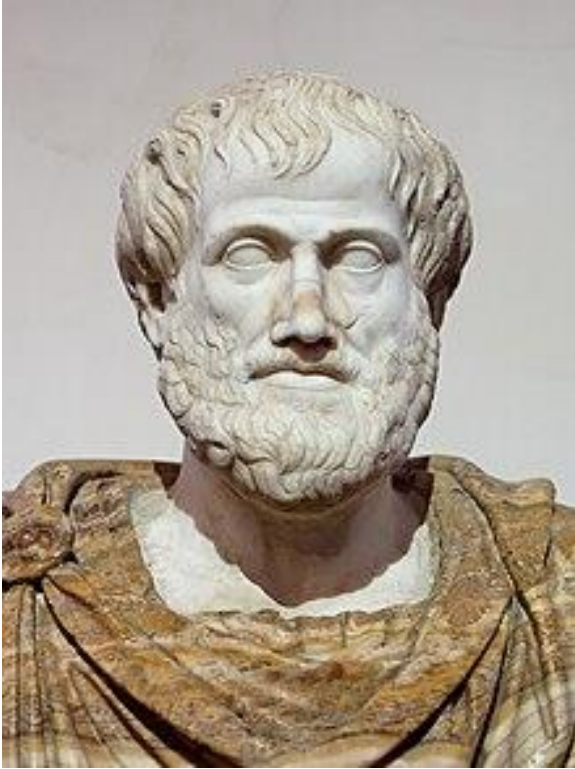
Instead ...



Rather than ad hoc decisions based on self-interest and generalisations about preferences, we favour a systematic methodology framed by organisational purpose



Aristotle and a purpose-focused approach (I)



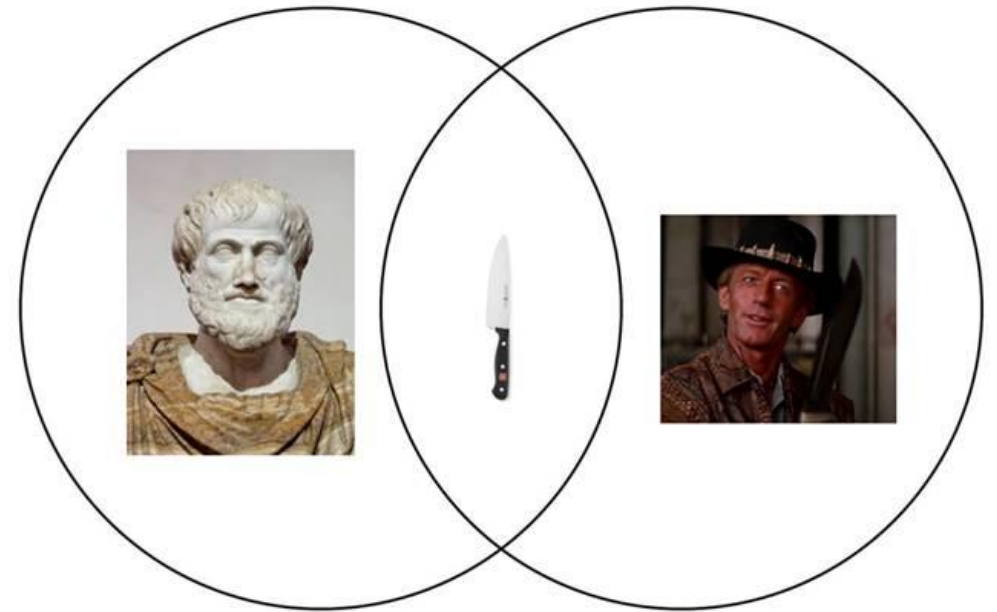
Aristotle 384-322 BC

Copyright: Wikipedia, "Aristotle," CC-BY-SA-4.0

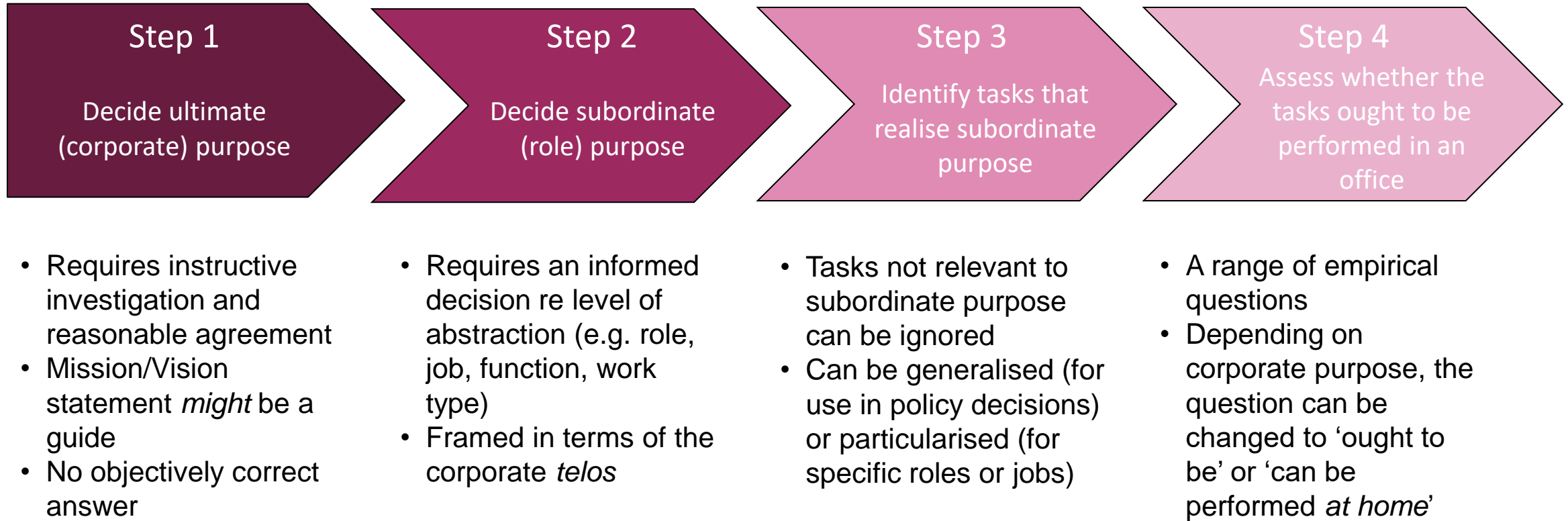
- Aristotle provides a sophisticated theory of the relationship between superordinate and subordinate purposes, and their implications for decisions and actions
 - Everything (people, flowers, machinery, institutions, ...) has an ultimate purpose, or *telos*
 - “every skill and every inquiry, and ... every action and rational choice, is thought to aim at some good; and so the good has been aptly described as that at which everything aims” (Nicomachean Ethics 1999 Bk 1 Ch 1)
- An activity’s (or thing’s) purpose defines the relevance and appropriate application of its attributes

Aristotle and a purpose-focused approach (II)

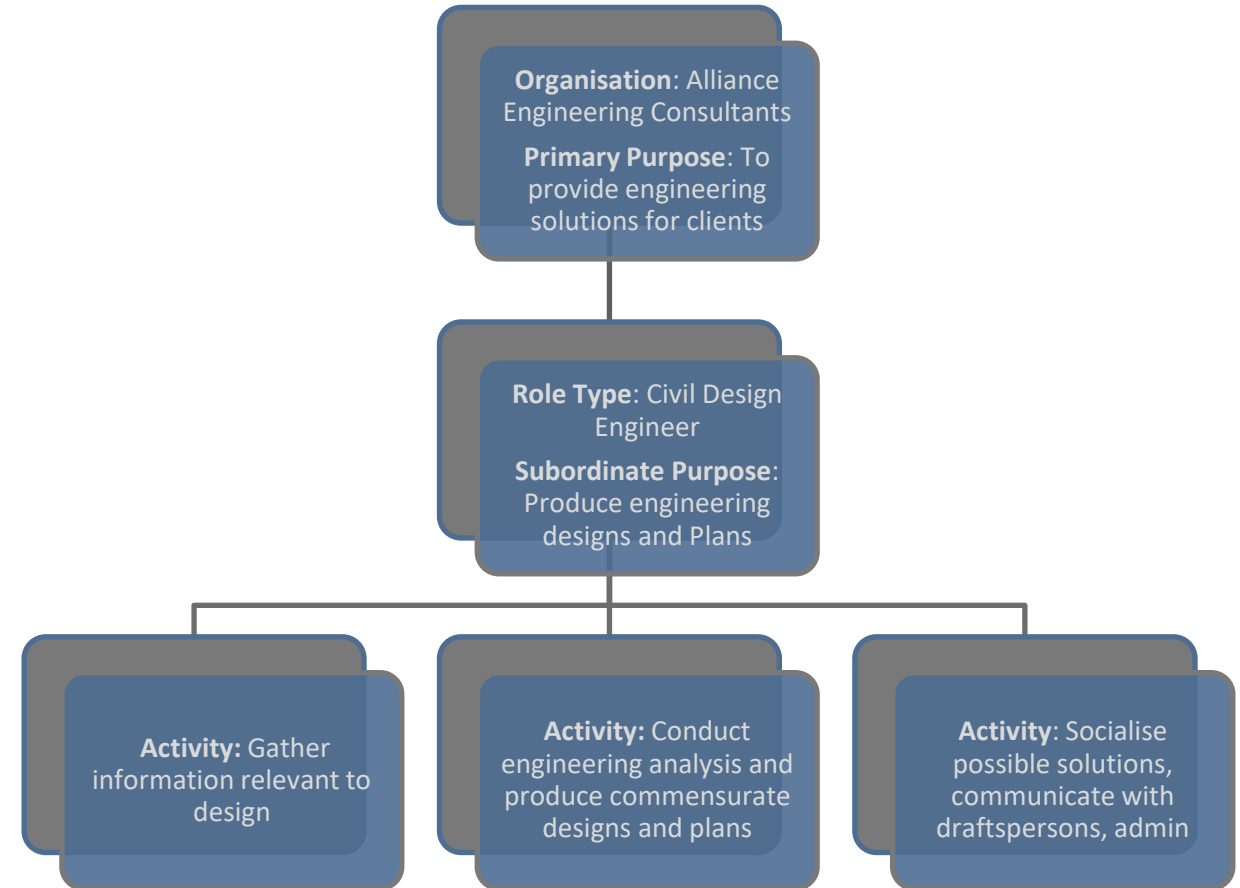
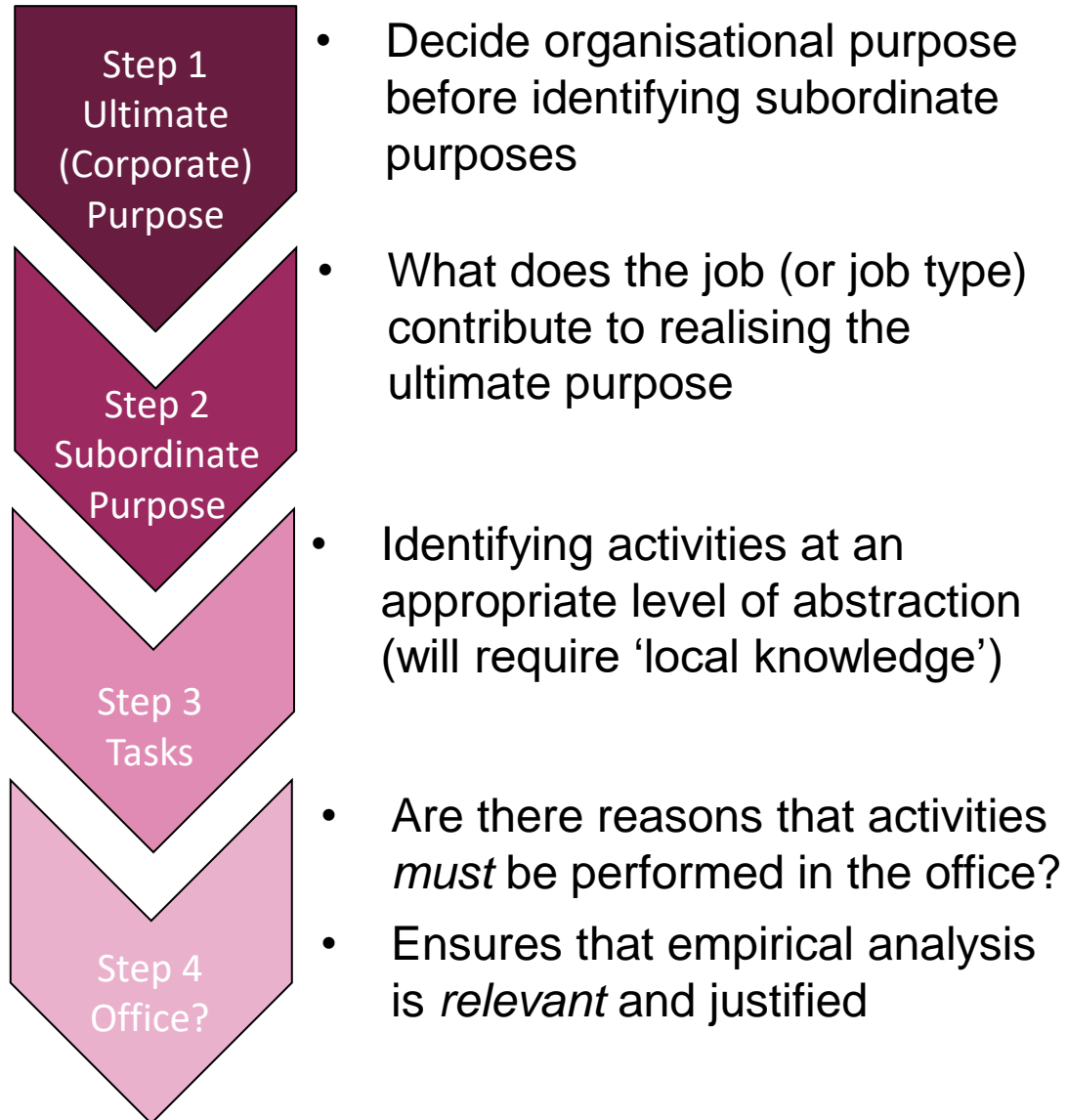
- An activity's (or thing's) purpose defines the relevance and appropriate application of its attributes
- So by understanding purpose, we make better decisions about the deployment and exercise of those attributes
 - e.g. the purpose of a knife
- Deciding the purpose of office work *in its context* will help decide its significant attributes, guiding both the threshold decision and consequent work arrangements



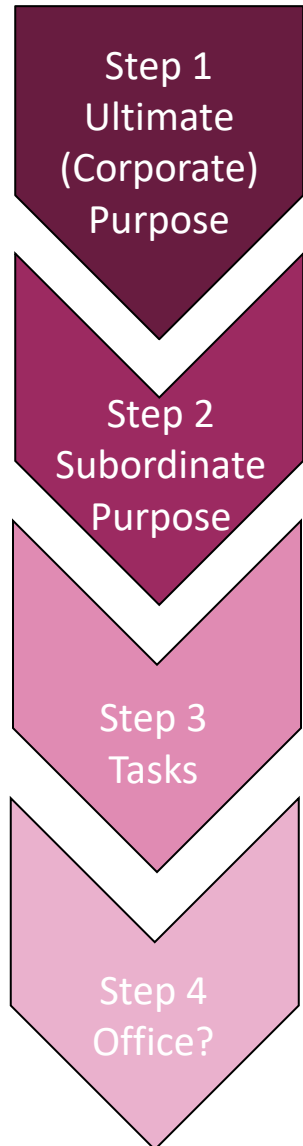
Steps in the purpose-focused approach



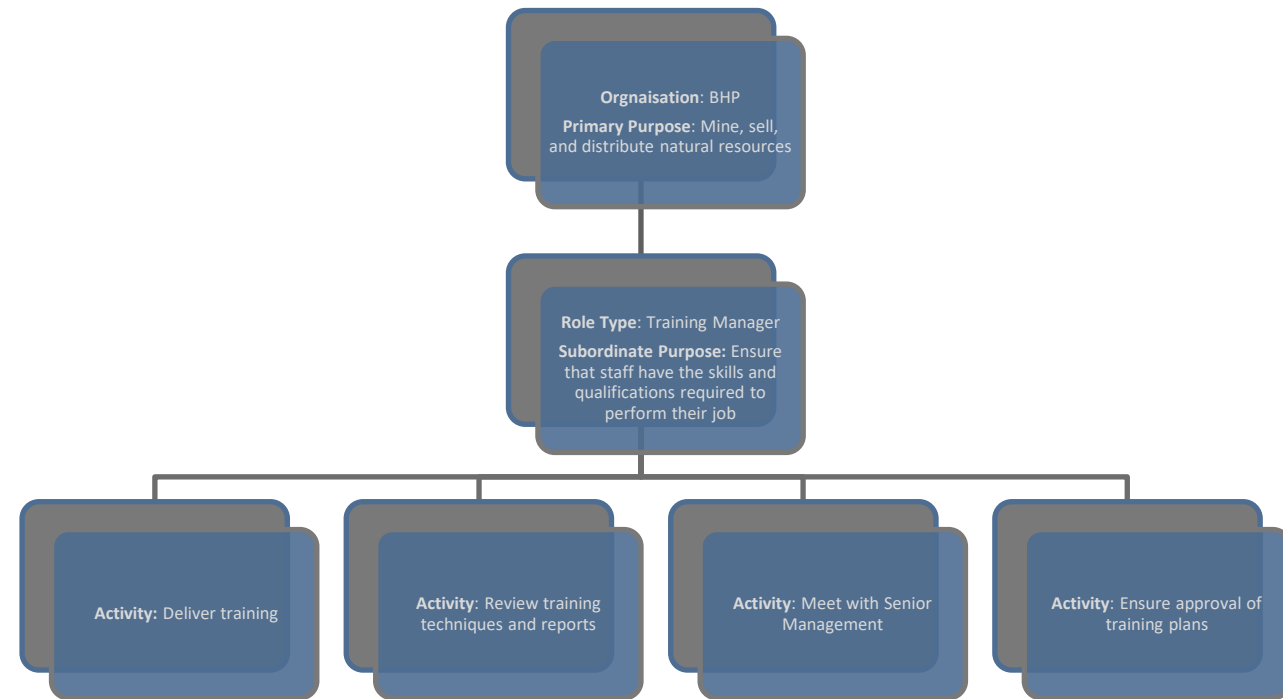
Example 1 – Design Engineer



Example 2 – Training Manager



- Size of the company might seem to complicate the process, but devolved decision making and clear procedures make it workable
- Suitability of delivery-oriented functions for remote work will turn on the nature of the delivery (e.g. on-line v. classroom training)
- The empirical analysis might change with new technology ... another 'round' of reviews?



Empirical questions (I)

- For Step 4, a basic understanding of the situation will sometimes be sufficient; in other cases, a detailed and sophisticated analysis will be needed
 - e.g. the design engineer's manager might decide that she is suited to home-based work just because she is well organised, adapt at CAD, and competent using Zoom
 - e.g. the training manager's suitability for home work might rely on new training technologies, so that the transition is delayed
 - e.g. one training manager role might be suitable for home work, but not another one
 - A manager responsible for a policy that applies to many different roles will require much empirical data, and must allow for assessments of individuals and particular jobs
 - A formal role profile and performance appraisal might be required for each case
 - For the hybrid approach, the ratio of home to office work will require empirical evaluation
 - Harmony amongst those affected will be encouraged by agreed method and data sources *conducted in terms of the agreed organisational purpose*

Empirical questions (II)

- Other empirical matters will inform decisions about a *range* of jobs and work types within an organisation
 - Availability of technologies supporting remote work
 - Availability of training and technical support
 - The place of embedded traditions and work practices
 - Access to organisational images and facilities
- Yet other empirical matters will inform decisions across a range of organisations
 - Efficacy of in-person v. on-line communication, and socio-cultural implications (trust, unity, clarity of message, ...)
 - Best means of group communications
 - Impact of long-term remote work on procedural discipline



Public policy implications

- Amendments to industrial relations instruments and practices
- Socio-economic impacts of new technologies and work practices
 - Including knock-on effects of increased automation
 - Encouraging new employees from amongst a home-based labour pool?
 - Will efficiency gains support a Universal Basic Income?
- Impacts of changed social arrangements and reduced interpersonal exchanges
 - Mental health risks
 - Scope of WA OH&S regulations expanded to include psychological harm
 - Public infrastructure implications
 - Changed patterns of power use
 - Impacts on transport infrastructure and public transport
 - Impacts on road, power, and internet infrastructure



Benefits of a purpose-focused approach

- Advantages of framing decisions in terms of corporate purpose
 - Discussions are oriented towards the good of the organisation
 - Rather than privileging certain people, jobs, skills, levels, etc.
 - Prevents decisions based on wrong (or subordinate) goals
 - Avoids arguments from self-interest and discussions of minutiae, reorienting the discussion to higher-level matters
 - Encourages stakeholders to refer to the language and substance of organisational purpose in subsequent discussions
 - Encourages constructive exchanges amongst and between organisational levels
 - Enables work arrangements to be revisited when circumstances change without 'going back to square one'

A Purpose-Focused Approach to Decisions About Returning to In-Person Office work

Full report is available at

research.curtin.edu.au/businesslaw/our-research/centres-and-institutes/jcipp/public-policy-digital-age/reports/