

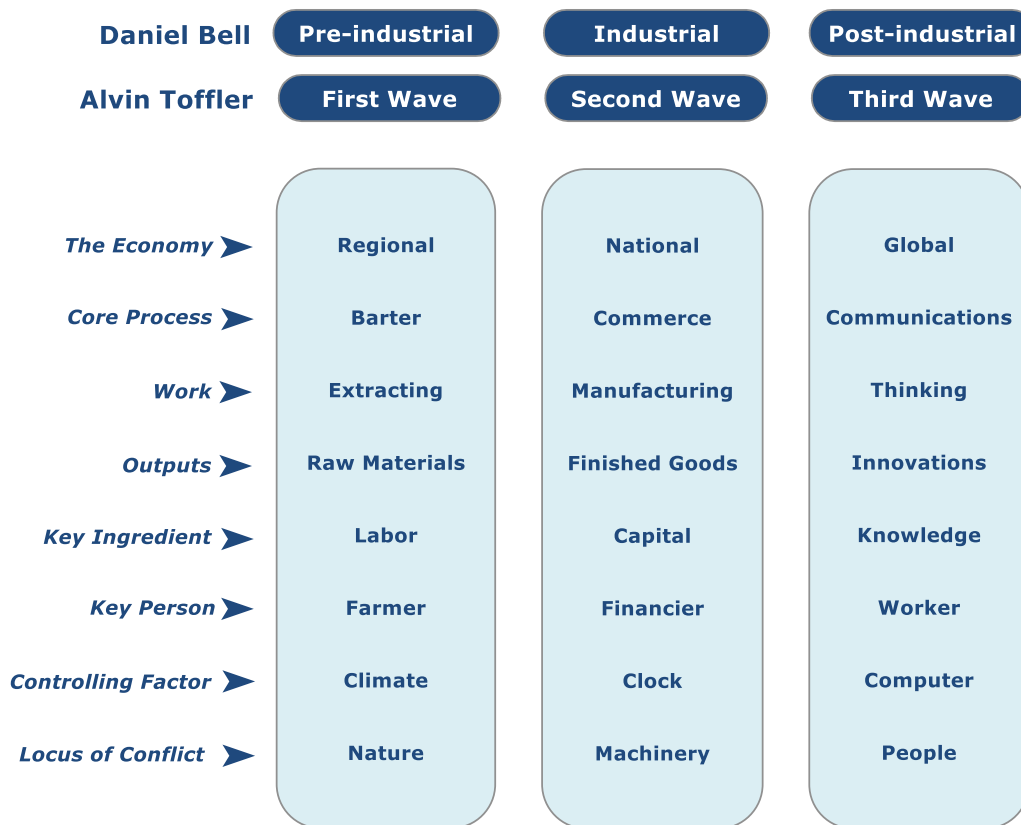
Knowledge Worker

Beyond Post-Industrial Society: A Fourth Era?

(April 2019)

A while back I added a new tool to my [Knowledge Workers' Tool Room](#). The tool, meant to be a device for facilitating discussions about the nature of the world in which we live and work, is a distillation of what Daniel Bell wrote about in *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1973) and what Alvin Toffler wrote about in *The Third Wave* (1980). The tool, titled "Three Eras," is shown below.

Three Eras



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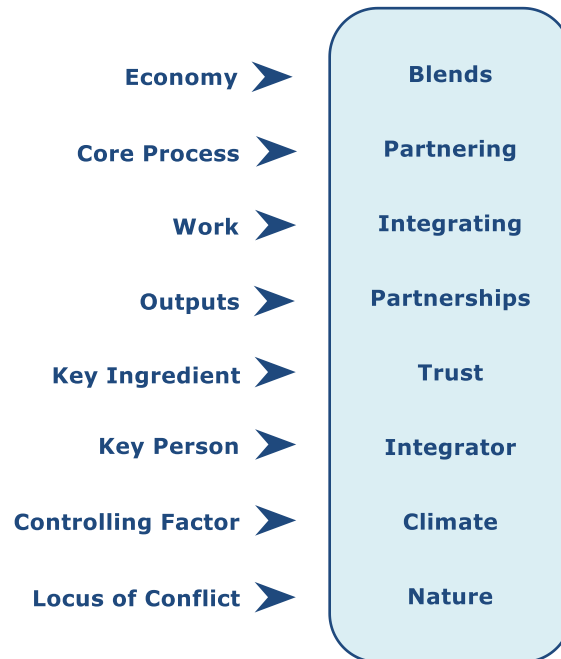
Matt Minahan, a long-time colleague and Organization Development (OD) professional, was quite taken with the tool and sent me an email suggesting that Toffler's "Third Wave" had passed and we are now in yet another new era. He went on to outline what he saw as some of the changes in the categories indicated on the left-hand side of the Three Eras diagram. I suggested to Matt he should publish a paper laying out his thoughts, which he is going to do. In the meantime, Matt's email sparked my own thinking and I have unabashedly borrowed many of the points he made in his email to me and used them to create yet another diagram. This one I have titled "A Fourth Era?" and it is shown below. (Note the question mark.)

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A Fourth Era?



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It is not my aim in this column to lay out each item in great detail. Instead, I want to use it to stimulate your thinking. The following questions are intended to do that.

- *Economy.* If the economy has evolved from regional to national to global, is it now moving on to blends or mixtures of those three or is it morphing into something else? How would you define and describe today's economy?
- *Core Process.* If the core process in society has shifted from bartering to commerce to communications, what do you see as the core process in society today? Is it still communications, much of it via social media? Or is it perhaps partnering, a consequence of no one organization or single person being able to do everything that is required? What do you see as the core process in today's society?
- *Work.* If the nature of high-value work has evolved from extracting to manufacturing to thinking (i.e., knowledge work), what is it now? If the core process is partnering, as shown above, does that signal that high-value work now entails integrating, organizing and unifying the efforts on the part of the partners? Or is it something else? What do you think?

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- *Outputs*. Outputs, too, have shifted over time – from raw materials to finished goods to innovations. If as the diagram above indicates, the core process is now one of partnering, then the major outputs of interest are partnerships (whether you call them alliances or coalitions or something else). Do you see something else? What is it?
- *Key Ingredient*. According to the Three Eras diagram, the key ingredient has shifted from labor to capital to knowledge. If partnering, partnerships and integrating the efforts of partners are critical factors in our modern world, then it seems likely that trust is now the key ingredient. Without trust, partnering simply can't work. What do you see as other key ingredients?
- *Key Person*. Farmer, financier, worker (especially the knowledge worker); these are the key players in each of the three preceding eras. Who is it now? If partnering, partnerships and integrating the efforts of the partners is so critical today, is the key person now someone who, for lack of a better term, we can call an "Integrator," someone who can organize and unify the partners and their efforts? Or is it someone else? If so, who?
- *Controlling Factor*. The controlling factor in society, especially in agrarian times, was the climate. Then, as we moved into the industrial era, it became the clock. In more recent years it has been the computer. Is that still the case or are we coming full circle to where climate is once again the controlling factor? No matter what else we do, we must protect (if not save) that planet on which we all live and work. Or do you see something else as the controlling factor in today's world? What?
- *Locus of Conflict*. Finally, there is the matter of the locus of conflict. In ancient hunting-gathering times and continuing through agrarian times, the locus of conflict was between the human race and nature. In the industrial era, it became a conflict between man and the machine. In the third era, the locus of conflict was between people. Now, especially in light of climate issues, perhaps we have come full circle and the locus of conflict is once again between the human race and nature. What do you think? Do you see something else? What?

This concludes my foray through the two diagrams above, the three eras written about by Bell and Toffler and the fourth era, triggered by Matt Minahan's email to me.

My primary aim in this month's column has been to get you to do what it is knowledge workers do: *think*. I hope I have succeeded and that you think about The Three Eras and what I have tentatively called "A Fourth Era." After all, it is a world of our making and we are free to remake – or at least reshape it.

As a final point, consider this: None of the three earlier eras have completely disappeared; all three – and the fourth, whatever its composition might be – are with us still. As performance improvement professionals, we might find ourselves in organizations that are a fit with any one or some mix of the three – and perhaps the fourth as well. So, think about this: How do we adjust our philosophy and our practices to fit the era(s) in which we find ourselves?

References

1. Bell, D. (1973), *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*. Basic Books: New York

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2. Toffler, A. (1980), *The Third Wave*. William Morrow: New York

About Matt Minahan

Matt Minahan, Ed.D., a well-known and highly-respected member of the professional organization development (OD) community, is the managing principal of [Matt Minahan & Associates](#), a firm that specializes in organization design and development. He is also an adjunct professor at American University and a past chair of the [OD Network](#).

About the Author

Fred Nickols is a knowledge worker, writer, consultant, and former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated Chief Petty Officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the *Chief Toolmaker* and *Lead Solution Engineer* at [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His web site is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Workers' Tool Room](#) and more than 200 free articles, book chapters and papers. Fred is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceXpress*. A complete listing of all Knowledge Worker columns is available [here](#).