Jennifer's Design Spine #3

(at this point, the research focus and central question are stabilized, some more experiential sub-questions are articulated, research strategies are becoming more focused and directed by the central research question)

Title

Constructing the New Worker: How employee agency and identity are reflected in 'future of work' narratives

Research Question(s)

'Future of work' narratives are descriptions of potential changes to the labour market resulting from technological innovations, emerging occupational fields and non-standard working arrangements. My research hopes to answer the main question - how is worker agency and identity positioned within those narratives?

Sub-questions

Is there a consistent worker 'image' that is being constructed in mainstream business publications? Is this different than how the future worker is being represented to workers themselves in future labour market scenarios? Who is being excluded as a 'worker of the future' as demonstrated by these narratives and what are the counter-narratives that are not being heard in mainstream publications. What do workers see as the conditions of labour market success today and will that be the same in the future? Do workers think they can change what is coming?

Why is this important?

There is tremendous speculation on the future of work in the industrialized world. It is the topic of academic conferences, business publications, government policy documents, blogs, and even associations. Given the wide range of narratives available, it will be valuable to understand what is being promoted as 'truth', and how that might influence how people see their ability to act or effect labour market changes, particularly a neoliberal context where individual responsibility is the dominate discourse and unions and labour associations continue are continuing to lose ground in the private sector.

My research will contribute to the ongoing discussions related to this topic by offering some insight into the dominate and counter narratives as well as potential consequences.

What is the benefit of doing this research?

Work is foundational to societies and their members, but the wave of change being precipitated by technological and socioeconomic change has the potential to erode workers' agency, shifting power more into the hands of employers. This research will contribute by understanding the discourse that is being promulgated about the future of work by business and how that might be impacting worker's agency. It will look at which populations and aspects of work that are being left out of this narrative and how worker identity is being shaped. It will also begin an investigation on how workers themselves understand the dominate discourse around the future of work and what it means to them.

How will this research be done?

Through a narrative analysis of business whitepapers, the identification of themes and characterizations of the 'worker of the future' will be identified. Business narratives have been identified because of the inherent power relationship between business owners and workers. Identifying how businesses might be shaping a 'future worker' through narrative speaks to this power dynamic.

In contrast, I will seek out alternative or counter-narratives through futurist websites, associations, and think tanks to identify different views of the worker of the future, if any.

A narrative analytical framework will be developed in advance of the coding/review
The analytical framework will look at issues such as:
• who the narrative is being created for;
• what roles workers will have in a future labour market;
• how worker agency is positioned;
• if there is an 'ideal worker' being imagined; and
• who might be excluded from this futurist scenario.
Three (3) whitepapers will be identified to assess the dominate narratives being promulgated by this community.
Twelve (12) non-business narratives will be sought to represent alternative narratives on the 'future of work'. This will be done through by looking at three (3) popular futurist websites to identify articles on the topic 'future of work.'
Finally, four (4) focus groups will be held to investigate what workers know about the future work and their attitudes towards the changes being predicted as well as their ability to influence the direction of those changes.

Are there still other methods and methodological approaches?
I have identified whitepapers as a source to identify how the 'future of work' is being interpreted by mainstream businesses, however they might offer enough information to be used as potential research project in themselves (e.g. are other narratives being created from these sources to build a unified 'story' of the worker of the future).

What will inform this research?
Neoliberalism will be a key analytical lens and as such post-modernist theorists such as Foucault will be used to interrogate the data. The overall theoretical framework will hopefully emerge from the literature review and preliminary investigations through an abductive approach

Who will help guide this research?
Neil Gerlach, Professor of Sociology, Carleton University will supervise this project. A committee member from the Media and Communications department is also being sought to support this investigation.

What is the tentative (optimistic) research plan?
Analytical Framework to be developed by June 2018
Literature review by July 2018
Data coding of whitepapers and website articles by September 2018
Focus groups conducting in October 2018
Data coding of focus groups November 2018
First draft of the research report by February 2019
Final draft of the research report by April 2019

What is still outstanding?
Literary review – this will capture what is already known about this issue and situate my research.
Theoretical framework – this will hopefully emerge from the literature review and preliminary investigations through an abductive approach.
Additional research on narrative analysis as a qualitative method to better understand the approach will be needed.