The Gig Mindset Report 2021

A Bold New Breed of Employee

A three-year perspective based on two gig-mindset surveys in 2018 and 2021, with occasional references to data from 2014 and 2016 for an even broader perspective

Three complementary angles

• Changes in workplace cultures and attitudes between 2018 and 2021.

• Quotes from research participants based on their experiences.

• What questions should we be exploring now?

If you cite information from this report, please refer to “The Gig Mindset Report 2021” by Jane McConnell. If appropriate, use the hashtag #gigmindset, and refer people to the website https://boldnewbreed.com/ for more information.

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The Gig Mindset Report 2021

I retired from frontline advising 3 years ago, and now focus on my research. I make much of that work available free of charge.
If you would like to support my research, consider buying a copy of my book.
I believe you will find it useful for your work, whether you are an independent worker or a member of an organization.
Here are a few Amazon links: US - UK - Fr - India - Germany
Thank you.

Background

“The Gig Mindset Advantage” 3 years research and interviews 2018-2021

“Organization in the Digital Age” 10 years of research & reports 2006-2017

20 years and over 120 digital workplace projects for over 60 global organizations.
Key Observations

The 2021 data showed **positive movement** towards a more gig-mindset work culture, but **no fundamental changes**. Organizations are still mostly in traditional mode.

The pandemic **strengthened** the gig mindset work culture – but not as dramatically as some people suggest. The **bottom-up movement** that revealed the emergence of the gig mindset several years ago is still active.

The top 25% of people already scoring high for gig-mindset behaviors did not evolve between 2018 and 2021. However, **the bottom 25% became more gig-mindset** in their behaviors. This is more important than the top evolving, because it signals change is **continuing** throughout the organization.

Organizations are **inching slowing** towards liberating people to do their work as they see best. Organizations have become more responsive and flexible, but 40% lean to inflexible and bureaucratic practices.

Individuals are showing willingness to experiment and “dare to do” more than before. However **genuine, deeper** individual freedoms such as challenging the status quo have not increased much.

Individuals reported the impact on the pandemic was that they felt **more freedom**, able to break the rules and accomplish more. However, in spite of doing more networking, they did not feel “more connected”.

Senior management is a “**serious concern holding us back**” and has been for many years.

One of the negative—but not new—learnings from this research is that organizations **prioritize customers** over employees. This is a repeated warning to organizations to reprioritize employees if they want to keep their customers.
Positioning and scope of the research

The survey was promoted as exploring the “gig mindset inside organizations”. It thereby attracted people who were interested in the gig mindset concept. The goal was not to do a statistical analysis of employee mindsets overall, but rather to explore the characteristics, contexts and impacts of the gig mindset on people and on organizations.

Data are self-assessments by the survey participants – about themselves and their organizations.

If you are not familiar with the gig mindset as a concept and my research in general, I recommend you take a look at Appendix B in this document, slides 35 through 39 or check out these pages on the Bold New Breed website:

•  https://boldnewbreed.com/about-the-research/
•  https://boldnewbreed.com/gig-mindset-traits-explored-in-the-research/

The individual dimension

The starting point was a comparison between traditional mindsets and gig mindsets from the viewpoint of 8 individual behaviors covering (1) the approach to work, (2) how teams work, (3) openness, (4) hierarchical influence, (5) freedom to challenge work practices, (6) external awareness, (7) networking and (8) individual professional advancement. (slide 38) It also explored the impact of the pandemic on individuals.

The organizational dimension

Organizational topics included: work cultures, how people and teams work, open communication including leadership style, the perception of the pace of change inside and outside the organization, the impact of the gig mindset on the organization and whether or not it accelerated the gig mindset work culture.
The world slowed down, inside and outside

Survey question: “How would you rate the pace of change and transformation overall – inside and outside your organization?”

Outside world “moving faster”

Very little difference between inside and outside

In 2018 people rated the pace of change to be considerably faster outside their organization than inside. Unsurprisingly, that difference no longer existed in 2021, given the state of affairs resulting from the pandemic. Things had become similar everywhere. Change had slowed down outside and increased inside, bringing the two worlds to the same perceived speed.
Has the pandemic strengthened the gig-mindset way of working?

“I do not see a return to pre-pandemic habits or activities any time soon. I think the pandemic brought a bit of "we are all in this together" mentality that allows more and better connections with people outside my team across the organization. In other words, it can provide a connection where one may not have existed before in that we can all relate to each other in that way.”

"I think management gained some insight that professions can and will hold themselves accountable whether they are working in an office in a traditional setting within traditional timeframes, or working outside the organization at home or elsewhere. And that people will connect to get things done and achieve goals even if they cannot do so in person.”

“I have become braver at speaking up and saying what I think in meetings. Maybe this is connected to a class I am taking at my church, maybe it is connected to being separated from others by a screen and so it seems safer to ask tough questions and give hard feedback, but whatever the case, I feel empowered to be a leader by doing this and I am encouraging my colleagues to do the same.”

“Senior leaders now trust staff to work, and achieve what they need to achieve, without being observed. Some have increased in measuring output as opposed to time reporting.”
2018 - “Has the gig mindset impacted your organization?”

The pandemic and the resulting work-from-home policies in many organizations strengthened the gig mindset work culture.

2021 - “Has the pandemic accelerated the adoption of a gig mindset in your organization?”

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Pandemic impact on individual people: more freedom, more accomplishments, but not more connected.

Networking – internal and external – did not seem to make people feel more connected, as the numbers show. “More connected” was the lowest impact according to people’s self-assessments.
Experimentation, autonomy and questioning increased in 2021. These are 3 key components of a gig-mindset work culture.

1. Experimenting, out-of-the box thinking, test-and-learn
2. Fluid teams, based on skills more than roles
3. Sharing work early before finishing
4. Initiate projects, assume responsibility without supervisor guidance
5. Challenge status quo, business model, work practices
6. High awareness of surroundings
7. Extensive networking
8. Growth path and personal brand are important

Three **people freedoms increased** (already present in over 50% of organizations)

- People **self-manage**, directing own work within generally established processes, (which is already a systemic limitation)
- People are encouraged to experiment and to **take initiatives**
- People rewarded for **problem-solving** (which showed the greatest increase)

**Genuine, deeper individual freedoms did not increase much** (still absent in over 50% of organizations)

- People **empowered**, reinventing, shortcutting
- **Decentralized** decision-making down to lowest level of accountability

- Self manage
- Experimenting encouraged
- Problem-solving rewarded
- Reinventing, shortcutting
- Decentralized decision-making

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Decentralized decision-making is a long-time problem, revealing rigid hierarchical controls and lack of trust.

There are fewer than 50% of organizations today with decentralized decision-making.
Did leadership change over 2018 and 2021?

“I've seen individuals throughout the organization start to make suggestions on improvements, new products, etc., although again it seems to be a product of their direct manager as opposed to a broader organization-wide cultural change. I do hold out hope that it will spread, although there are few signs of it as of yet.”

“We saw the creation of new job functions to perform additional controls over expenses, people utilization, increased earning margins, and so on, instead of adapting to the new needs of markets and clients, and looking for new ways to use our capabilities in more added-value services.”

“Some senior leaders got closer to their teams but still use the command and control approach.”

“I cannot say that I’ve noticed a huge change. There has been a shift to virtual meetings but silos still remain. Uptake of chat spaces like MS Teams is limited so that public conversations are relatively rare, although I see some progress on this. My organization has a largely command-and-control mindset, and the pandemic has not really impacted that. The promoted leaders don’t necessarily demonstrate a gig mindset either. Instead they tend to have traditional ways of working even the younger ones.”
Senior management represent the biggest obstacle when asked “What are the obstacles you encounter for moving towards or strengthening a gig mindset work culture?”

The situation has improved by an average 1 % point each year for the last 5 years! (From 23% in 2016 to 18% in 2021.)

In 2016, 23% rated “lack of open and participatory attitude of senior management” to be a “serious concern holding us back”. It deceased 4 % points to 19% in 2018 then one more % point down in 2021 to 18%.
"Our organizational priorities today" (2021)
Customers first! Employees last!

These figures make you wonder how organizations will keep their customers if they do not increase their focus on employees. The data here is troubling.

More worrisome, we are seeing companies having difficulty keeping and/or attracting employees at mid/end 2021. This is creating problems for serving customers in many sectors of business.
Organizational priorities today (2021) - Detailed breakdown

“I can see the company trying to support its employees and trying to make positive changes. But I know it is easy to lose focus when times change such as when we go back to the office. If we do want to succeed at this it has to be something we keep at the front of our minds. The biggest thing that I think we could improve is placing a higher value on employee experience across all areas.” Manager, insurance industry, US-based
Has the pandemic triggered opening new opportunities for people and organizations?

“I do not see us going back to the old ways of working. Geographic boundaries are becoming less important. Work schedules are being more flexible. People are adapting to the use of technology to increase collaboration. When the general restrictions created by the pandemic are gone, but the flexibility remains, it seems like there will be an increased ability to shape work and personal life to better match individual needs.”

“It most likely accelerated the need to adopt a gig mindset. A culture change is on its way to open up to our ecosystem, including coopetition. Employees are now challenged on developing a ‘growth mindset’.”

“Before the pandemic, 99% of people were located in one of several local offices and teams were largely built by people within the same office. With everyone remote, cross-office teams are forming more frequently.”

“The way we organize our work and life is changing so much that companies need to let go of their fear and constantly adapt. Our company is going to redesign our offices in Amsterdam and Cologne, with a smaller staff (people will continue to work partly at home even after corona). We believe that work and private life will blur even more, especially because the younger generations are constantly connecting with others.”
Organizations are becoming more **flexible and reactive**

Survey statement: “Our organization can respond rapidly to major events or transitions: market changes, competition, economic downturns, environmental or disaster events.”

“**Strongly agrees**” are low, and including “**agree**” makes only 60%.

What about the others? These organizations are **not well set to face new challenges** and adapt rapidly to change.

But it is **encouraging** that perceptions of flexibility and reactivity increased nearly 10 percentage points between 2018 and 2021.
People in the top 25% on gig-mindset scores showed little change between 2018 and 2021.

People with lower results in 2018 scored significantly higher in 2021.

The top 25% did more networking in 2021, and the bottom 25% did less.

Self assessment on a 5-point scale comparing 2018 and 2021 data.

Already high, the top quarter in 2021 showed no improvement since 2018

The bottom quarter moved up significantly in 2021, suggesting they may move higher still in the future
The gap between the top 25% and the bottom 25% is greatest when it comes to networking.

Are they watching trends in general to get a feel for changes in work life and the world, looking around for new places to work? Or interacting with people outside their organization for other reasons....!
Did the pandemic simply accelerate changes that were happening anyway?

“Personally I am optimistic in that the pandemic will have accelerated a future that was anyway to happen and answered questions that otherwise would have taken a long time. The open question is what the new equilibrium will look like. And how much this collective 'near death' experience will have on employees' mindset, love for work and love for personal life. With on top of all that the impact of AI, process automation and robotics to name just three.”

“It really jumpstarted cross-company collaboration programs that we had already started in 2019/2020.”
Business goals and plans have been communicated to people throughout most organizations for several years. This is a one-way behavior.

However, interactive and listening behaviors, present in only 50% of organizations in 2018, increased to only 60% in 2021.
The 5-year perspective shows organizations **inching slowly** towards liberating people to do their work as they see best and to benefit the organization.

But some things change so slowly that ambitious, workers looking for better work lives will move on.

*(Extract from “The Gig Mindset Advantage”)*

“If gig mindsetters encounter repeated obstacles, they may decide to look for a more fulfilling place to work. This is easier to do now that established organizations are actively seeking new talent, and small businesses and startups abound.”

From a manager who understands the risk of slow change...

“If I as a manager don't encourage the gig mindset I would lose both the motivation and in the end the best people.” (from a senior manager in a large company)

From an employee in a hundred-person startup:

“We just got a new guy in our company. He’s about 35 or so and used to work pretty high up at [name of globally famous brand company]. He resigned and came here. He’s making much less money, he says, but the work is more interesting, and he’s enjoying himself much more.”

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Questions to ask about the world around you, inside and outside

Is there an increase in bottom-up movements or “civil disobedience”?

Are people leaving companies more frequently than before?

Is leadership evolving in a healthy direction?
Questions to ask about the world around you, inside and outside

Is there an increase in bottom-up movements or “civil disobedience”?

• Are individuals taking more initiatives without hierarchical pre-agreement?
• Are others in the organization joining their initiatives?
• How is management reacting?
• Is this movement gaining support from people in different parts of organizations? If so, where?

Are people leaving companies more frequently than before? If so, why?

• To start their own activity as freelancers or to create small companies?
• To join other companies with more freedom in the work culture?
• To join companies that have an inspiring sense of purpose?
• To improve the quality of their work-life balance?
Questions to ask about the world around you, inside and outside

• Is leadership evolving in a healthy direction?
  • Do “leaders” visibly encourage people to challenge the status quo and do they listen, or is it all talk?
  • Are they moving towards more command-and-control or more open and participatory?
  • Is the concept of leadership still based on hierarchy, or is it moving towards understanding that leaders are people who bring about change, from any position and any level in the organization?
• Is decentralized decision-making increasing or decreasing?
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Purchase my book to support my research

I retired from frontline advising 3 years ago, and now focus on my research. I make much of that work available free of charge. If you would like to support my research, consider buying a copy of my book.

I believe you will find it useful for your work, whether you are an independent worker or a member of an organization.

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“This book is a breakthrough!”
Jessica Lipnack, author, The Age of the Network and Virtual Teams

“At once a manifesto and an action plan ... (to) re-make diverse teams and businesses into more resilient, innovative and purposeful organizations.”
David Slocum, Academic Director at Rare with Google

“Challenges us to think about the future of our organizations, and more importantly, of our people, in a way that transcends cultures and structures.”
Stephane Aknin, VP, Creative & Content, Prudential Financial, Inc.

“Will inspire individuals to lead no matter what their title, and help organizations create a more agile, collaborative culture.”
John Stepper, author of Working Out Loud
Links about the Gig Mindset research and learnings
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Peter Drucker Forum blog posts
2021 – The Gig Mindset: A compass for navigating uncertainty
2020 – Leadership Everywhere Means Reversed Leadership
2018 – How a Gig Mindset Inside Organizations Will Shape our Future
2017 – The Inclusive Organization and the Reachability Factor
2016 – Seeding an Entrepreneurial Work Culture
APPENDICES

Appendix A. Demographics: Profiles of the survey participants in 2018 and 2021

Appendix B. Understand the gig mindset concept
Appendix A. Demographics
Profiles of the survey participants in 2018 and 2021

One of the reasons for doing the 2021 survey was to see how the pandemic had affected the gig mindset.

There were nearly 300 participants in 2018. In 2021, there were just over 160. The deliberate timing of the survey meant that people were in lockdown mode, working from home in many countries. As we know, people were overloaded and fatigued with virtual meetings as well as having to juggle work and family activities in the same space and timeframes. This very likely contributed to the drop in participation.

However, as you will see in the following slides, the two populations are similar in type of organization, geographical location, age, size of workforce and global footprint.
Type of organizations
Similar between the two years

2018
- For profit (publically traded): 34%
- For profit (privately owned): 43%
- Nonprofit: 9%
- Government: 6%
- Other: 6%

2021
- For profit (publically traded): 28%
- For profit (privately owned): 55%
- Nonprofit: 4%
- Government: 7%
- Other: 6%
Geographical location
Similar global spread between the two years

2018
- Oceania: 6%
- North America: 19%
- Asia: 25%
- Europe: 49%

2021
- Oceania: 6%
- North America: 19%
- Asia: 21%
- Europe: 54%
Age of organization
Similar between the two years

2018
- 10-29 years: 33%
- 50-100 years: 17%
- 30-49 years: 15%
- 1-4 years: 7%
- 5-9 years: 6%
- Don't know: 20%

2021
- 10-29 years: 34%
- 50-100 years: 12%
- 30-49 years: 16%
- 1-4 years: 6%
- 5-9 years: 6%
- Don't know: 25%
Size of workforce
Slightly fewer large organizations in 2021, but a comparable breakdown between the two years

2018
- Under 100: 20%
- 100 to 1k: 30%
- 1k to 10k: 14%
- 10k to 50k: 14%
- 50k to 100k: 14%
- Over 100k: 12%

2021
- Under 100: 20%
- 100 to 1k: 32%
- 1k to 10k: 17%
- 10k to 50k: 14%
- 50k to 100k: 14%
- Over 100k: 4%
Global footprint

Similar global footprint between the two years although slightly fewer countries per organization in 2021 (which corresponds to the overall smaller size of workforces)
Appendix B. Understand the gig mindset concept
Why a **new breed?**

Freelancer in the open marketplace

Full time salaried person in an organization

=Gig Mindsetter

Full time salaried person in an organization working with the **mindset** and **behaviors** of an independent freelancer
Why bold?

Many leaders and senior managers show signs of...

- Pride in past success
- Dependence on best practices and benchmarking
- Fear of losing power
- Fear of speed
- A false sense of safety in silos
- Protected in filter bubbles

Vested interest in the past leads to willful blindness
A spectrum between traditional and gig

prefer procedures, proven & approved methods  
prefer out-of-the-box thinking, test & learn

prefer to work with colleagues, responsibilities defined by roles  
seek opportunities to work with different teams, responsibilities defined by skills

prefer to finish project work before sharing  
work out loud, sharing before finishing, taking early feedback

seek guidance, decision-making, & supervision from hierarchy  
take initiatives without guidance, assume responsibility for decisions

strive to maintain stability, consistency in how we work  
challenge status quo, including business & work practices

focus primarily on what is happening inside my organization  
highly aware of external trends: society, economy, technology

some networking, primarily internal & related to my projects  
extensive networking - internal & external, seek interactions with others

my career path important, manager & HR key partners  
my growth path important, I am primarily responsible
Research participants were asked to rate themselves on a 5-point scale for each of the 8 behaviors

Self assessment on a 5-point scale

**Traditional Mindset**

- Behavior 1: Motivation
  - I am focused on doing the job while respecting established procedures. I prefer proven and approved methods.

- Behavior 4: Autonomy
  - I prefer working under guidance from my supervisor and decision-making processes that respect hierarchical flows.

**Gig Mindset**

- I prefer out of the box thinking and test-and-learn approaches.

- I often take responsibility for initiating/advancing a project without guidance, and assume responsibility for decisions.

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That’s it for now!

Get in touch if you have questions or comments.

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