CHAPTER 15

Future Work and the Capability Approach
Digitalisation, Globalisation, and Climate Change

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Introduction: Why Work Capabilities Matter Now

The capability approach (CA) shifts attention from mere resources and outputs to real freedoms: the opportunities people have to be and to do what they have reason to value in their working lives [1, 2]. At the start of this book, this is captured by the metaphor of the cathedral builder: every worker should have the potential to contribute to something meaningful, provided that the social, organisational, and institutional context enables them to do so [3]. The CA is both normative (work should enhance capabilities) and context-sensitive (what is valuable differs across people and settings). This prevents both economic reductionism and paternalistic 'one-size-fits-all' prescriptions, while ensuring legitimacy through public deliberation and the inclusion of marginalised voices [4]. Classical contributions underline that justice in work means equality of freedoms, not just equality of resources, and that institutions have duties to protect, *expand, and restore* human capabilities [5, 6].

The former chapters of this book showed that the CA, applied to work, can cope with these challenges. In this chapter, we argue that the CA is also suitable for dealing with foreseeable future challenges, such as digitalisation, globalisation, and climate change. To this end, the work environment must be revised from a capability perspective into a more egalitarian, diverse, and inclusive one.

This makes the CA a suitable framework for transforming the challenges of future developments, such as digitalisation, globalisation, and diversity, and the ecological crisis, into opportunities for increased participation in decision-making and workers' freedoms and well-being.

Wolff and de-Shalit argue that these freedoms (capabilities and functionings) only have meaning if they are also secure in the sense of being future-proof and sustainable [7]. They introduce the concept of 'secure functionings'. This refers to the stability and resilience of a person's

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functionings and capability set over time – the assurance that one's basic capabilities will not suddenly collapse or be withdrawn. It's not enough to have capabilities at one point in time; individuals need confidence that these will be protected and sustainable.

Wolff and de-Shalit contrast secure functionings with precarious capability possession – for example, someone might currently be housed but at constant risk of eviction, or have a job but under insecure conditions [7].

We endorse the ideas of Wolff and de-Shalit. For current work, but certainly also for the challenges in future work described in this chapter, future security is just as important as a good current level of flourishing and well-being at work.

Framing the Future of Work through the Capability Lens

As an open and integrating framework, the CA is particularly well-suited to interpret how technological, global, and ecological transformations shape work and well-being. Chapters 1 and 2 introduced the model of sustainable employability and the seven work values – ranging from using and developing knowledge and skills, to participation in decision-making, fair income, and contributing to a greater good [3, 6, 8, 9]. Chapter 8 demonstrated in a scientific way and Chapter 10 in a practical way, how strategic and inclusive human resource management (HRM) can translate these values into genuine opportunities (capability sets) at the micro, meso, and macro levels [10, 11]. The CA thus provides a bridge between individual aspirations [12], organisational governance [6, 10], and societal transitions, while identifying conversion gaps where resources do not translate into real opportunities [4, 13, 14, 15].

Digitalisation: Skills, Autonomy, and the Changing Nature of Work

Technology, automation, and artificial intelligence (AI) are reshaping tasks, eliminating some and creating new ones [16, 17]. This requires the acquisition of complementary human skills rather than simply replacing them. A new form of management is needed that introduces a new dynamic of algorithmic control and a focus on fairness, depending on design and governance [18, 19]. Remote and hybrid work have become structural, with mixed effects. On the one hand, capabilities may be at stake, such as opportunities for learning, autonomy, participation, and

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meaningful social relationships, as enshrined in the seven work values [8, 9]. On the other hand, there are positive effects on efficient productivity from a strict financial-economic perspective when work is properly organised [20, 21].

According to Oosterlaken, the CA offers a compelling framework for guiding the implementation of technology in organisations [22]. Technology is often promoted as a tool for development. For example, enabling farmers in low-income countries to access market prices via mobile phones and increase their incomes. Such innovations can expand human capabilities across diverse domains, including health, education, livelihoods, and democratic participation. From a CA perspective, information and communication technologies embody the ideal of creating opportunities for individuals to choose which valued 'functionings' to pursue.

From the perspective of the CA, technology, automation, and AI are not just passive tools. They are active 'mediators' that shape individuals' experiences, actions, and sense of self [17]. For example, smartphones act as a portal through which individuals engage with others, access information, and navigate their daily lives. Technology's power lies in its ability to either expand or restrict individuals' capabilities – their real freedoms. Whether its impact is positive or negative depends on how it is designed and used.

Technology, automation, and AI expand capabilities and well-being in the following ways:

- Developing and maintaining meaningful relationships: Communication technologies directly expand individuals' capability for *building and maintaining meaningful contacts*, especially across distances.
- Developing new knowledge and skills: Personalised education platforms directly enhance individuals' capability to *develop new knowledge and skills*.
- Using knowledge and skills: Productivity tools, such as specialised software, allow individuals to better apply their professional expertise in work.

Technology, automation, and AI restrict capabilities and well-being in the following ways:

- Developing and maintaining meaningful relationships: 'Technoference', or the interference of technology in personal relationships, can reduce individuals' capability for meaningful connection.

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- Exposure to 'cyberbullying' and 'unhealthy comparisons' on digital platforms can harm mental health and restrict individuals' well-being.
- Equality: The 'digital divide' – the gap in access to technology – can worsen inequalities and restrict opportunities for those left behind.

To genuinely expand capabilities, technology must be designed and regulated with attention to human agency and the lives people have reason to value [22]. A CA-informed approach would therefore prioritise the following strategies:

- Skills agenda: investing in digital literacy, transversal skills, and lifelong learning infrastructures [23].
- Value-sensitive design: ensuring participatory processes that involve workers in the design, implementation, and governance of digital tools [24, 25]. Within organisations, this means deploying technology, automation, and AI in ways that enhance, rather than erode, workers' autonomy, skills, and participation.
- Autonomy-supportive organisations: monitoring not only performance but also potential capability deprivations such as loss of participation and taking measures to prevent this. Using tools like the Capability Set for Work Questionnaire (CSWQ) and structured capability dialogues [14] [see Chapter 2, appendices].

By considering the strategies mentioned, technological innovation becomes a means to support socio-technical systems that foster well-being and justice, rather than merely driving efficiency or profit [17, 22].

Globalisation: Diversity, Inequality, and Cross-Border Complexity

The CA demonstrates that globalisation creates both enabling and constraining conditions for work capabilities through migration dynamics, the dual effects of economic globalisation on job opportunities and employment security, and global-local interactions that generate new forms of work inequality based on cultural diversity, gender, and migrant status [26, 27, 28]. Researchers describe migration as both a capability and a context where work capabilities are shaped, constrained, or expanded [27, 29, 30]. Diversity has positive outcomes when psychological safety and inclusive practices are present, but without these conditions, diversity can create tension and inefficiency [31]. Globalisation interacts with local systems of oppression to create new forms of capability deprivation, notably for migrants and women [27, 30].

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Inequality is a pressing challenge. Highly skilled workers and technology-intensive sectors benefit from open markets, while low-skilled or geographically immobile workers often face job insecurity and stagnant wages [32]. Platform and gig work have created new opportunities but also heightened precarity, leaving workers with few protections or benefits [33]. Migration intermediaries, which facilitate cross-border labour mobility, can simultaneously empower and exploit workers by charging fees and enforcing dependency relationships [34]. Inequality is not only about wages but also about unequal access to education, health care, and opportunities for meaningful work. New organisational forms, such as platform work and remote teams, can broaden access to work, but can also redistribute risks and power asymmetrically [35]. Virtual, culturally diverse teams perform well when coordination, scope, and role clarity are guaranteed [36].

Cross-border complexity challenges organisations and policymakers as firms operate across jurisdictions with varying labour laws, worker protections, and cultural expectations [37]. Managing global teams requires coordinating across time zones, languages, and norms about work hours and authority. Complex supply chains raise questions about how to ensure fair treatment of workers in countries with weaker labour standards. Research on "mobility injustice" highlights how cross-border commuters and migrant workers face vulnerabilities tied to legal status, documentation, and social protections [37].

Diversity, inequality, and cross-border complexity are defining challenges of the globalised future of work. The CA provides a normative lens to evaluate whether work arrangements genuinely expand human freedoms rather than increase efficiency or profit [1, 2]. In the context of diversity, this means moving beyond demographic representation to ensure that all workers can fully participate, exercise voice, and influence decision-making. This can be achieved through culturally sensitive work design, training for cultural agility, and environments that foster psychological safety, so that diversity becomes a source of empowerment rather than marginalisation [31].

Applied to inequality, the CA reframes the issue as one of unequal freedoms, not just unequal outcomes. It calls for policies that guarantee basic capabilities for all workers – such as access to education, health, decent working conditions, and opportunities for skill development – so that individuals can pursue lives they value. Practical measures include extending social protections to gig and platform workers, supporting lifelong learning and reskilling programmes, and enforcing global labour standards across supply chains [38].

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For cross-border complexity, the CA emphasises the need to eliminate institutional and structural barriers that restrict workers' actual freedoms. This could involve harmonising labour standards internationally, recognising qualifications across borders, and creating policies that protect migrant workers' rights regardless of their legal status. Digital tools and flexible organisational practices can help workers navigate time-zone and language differences, preserving work–life balance and preventing exclusion from key decisions [34].

Capabilities such as participation, meaningful connections, and a fair income may be at stake. For marginalised groups, access to opportunities and conversion factors (such as language, recognition of qualifications, or safety) are critical. Chapter 8 demonstrated how inclusive HRM can address these challenges, emphasising employment security over limited job security [10].

Possible strategies are:

- intercultural competence training and inclusive routines [39];
- inclusion by design in HR practices and governance structures [3]; and
- fairer organisational leadership with transparent rating systems, accessible data, and representation of workers' voices [35].

These strategies aim to ensure that globalisation and diversity lead to empowerment, rather than marginalisation and greater inequality.

Climate Change: Sustainability, Purpose, and Transformation

The ecological crisis demands rapid decarbonisation and major sectoral shifts [40]. Zimmerman and Engelbrecht argue for a reconceptualisation of work within a normative rather than a preference-based framework [41]. Preference-based frameworks are often evident in social and ecological approaches, which focus on individual choice or satisfaction. In contrast, a normative framework emphasises justice and stakeholder participation as a means to work towards socio-ecological sustainability. A capability-based definition of sustainable work integrates ecological and social sustainability with opportunities for political participation, emphasising that truly sustainable work must enable workers to shape the conditions of their labour while contributing to broader socio-ecological well-being [42].

Conceptualising responses to climate change through the CA frames development in terms of people's substantive freedoms rather than narrow outcomes or preferences [1, 2]. This perspective asks whether sustainability strategies expand or restrict stakeholders' real opportunities to achieve

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valued ways of living. For instance, an organisation may succeed in reducing its carbon footprint by imposing strict productivity targets; yet, in doing so, it may undermine workers' autonomy and well-being, effectively constraining their capabilities [43].

Viewing climate action through the lens of the CA reframes organisational purpose as enabling capabilities that support climate resilience and justice. The goal of business shifts from compliance or efficiency towards 'true business sustainability', where the organisation's raison d'être is explicitly aligned with societal and ecological well-being [44]. Purpose becomes a vehicle for fostering collective capabilities [6], such as the capacity to deliberate about long-term climate risks, share responsibility across stakeholders, and innovate in socially just ways [45]. Embedding participatory decision-making processes enables employees to exercise their capability for 'practical reason' – to choose meaningful goals – and for 'affiliation', to work in ways that respect the dignity of others [2].

Organisational transformation in this context is not purely structural but normative: it seeks to broaden stakeholders' abilities to contribute to a just transition. Key capabilities such as education, voice, and security become central, raising questions about whether organisational policies provide the knowledge, skills, and stability needed to adapt to sustainability transitions [46]. Leadership plays a crucial role here. Caldwell et al. argue for a model of virtuous leadership grounded in character and moral purpose, which helps expand employees' moral agency and strengthens their ability to exercise practical reason when addressing climate-related challenges [47].

This approach also provides a bridge between social and ecological justice. Socially, it requires that climate strategies do not reduce basic capabilities – such as health or livelihood – for vulnerable groups [45]. Ecologically, it recognises that future generations' capabilities depend on respecting planetary boundaries today [43]. Success, therefore, must be measured not only in financial or ecological social governance terms, however well-intentioned the latter may be, but also in whether organisational actions secure the capability of current and future communities to live dignified lives [48].

Finally, the CA offers practical tools for research and organisational assessment. Scholars can map relevant capabilities, drawing on the list developed by Van der Klink et al. [8] and tested by Abma et al. [9] or developing context-specific sets. Organisational practices – whether in governance, human resources, or supply chains – can then be analysed in terms of which capabilities they expand or restrict. This also opens the door for capability-sensitive metrics, such as access to green jobs,

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participation in decision-making, or resilience to climate shocks, providing a nuanced basis for evaluating socio-ecological transformation [48, 49].

Principles of a just transition emphasise social dialogue, decent jobs, and retraining [50]. Risks include job losses in carbon-intensive sectors, greenwashing, and moral distress when workers' values clash with organisational practices. Capabilities at stake include agency, contribution to the common good, fair income, and participation in decision-making regarding the shaping of transitions [8, 9, 51].

Possible strategies are:

- Green skills and jobs: coordinated upskilling and reskilling alliances [50].
- Capability impact transparency: reporting not only on carbon reductions and sustainability aims but also on impacts on workers' freedoms and well-being.
- Co-creation of transition pathways: engaging employees and stakeholders in planning, ensuring fairness and legitimacy [50].

These strategies aim to increase participation in decision-making about the transition and to enhance employee freedoms and well-being.

Leading for Capabilities: Resilience, Flexibility, and Inclusion

The accelerating transformations of the world of work – driven by digitalisation, demographic shifts, and global uncertainty – demand new forms of leadership that move beyond output control towards fostering human flourishing. Traditional approaches to leadership often focus on efficiency, compliance, or short-term performance, but such models risk constraining rather than enabling employees' opportunities to thrive. The CA provides a compelling alternative: it conceptualises leadership not as the exercise of authority but as the expansion of employees' substantive freedoms to achieve valued beings and doings [1, 8, 9].

Framing leadership through the CA shifts the central question from "how do leaders maximise productivity?" to 'do organisational practices expand or restrict people's real opportunities to live meaningful working lives?' Leadership becomes an ethical practice of enabling resilience, flexibility, and inclusion, recognising that these qualities are not merely instrumental to organisational survival but intrinsic to human dignity at work.

This perspective challenges leaders to create environments of trust, participation, and openness, where individuals feel safe to speak up, take risks, and learn from failure [52, 53]. It positions resilience not as individual

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toughness but as a collective capability supported by fair policies, inclusive practices, and long-term investment in skills and development [54]. Flexibility, likewise, is redefined: it is not simply about adapting to external pressures but about ensuring that workers retain meaningful choice and agency amid transitions. Inclusion becomes more than representational diversity; it is the practice of supporting both belonging and uniqueness, thereby expanding the capability sets of all employees [3, 55].

Seen this way, leadership is inherently normative. It is not only about responding to disruption but about shaping workplaces that enlarge human freedom, voice, and participation in ways that foster resilience across individuals and organisations alike. By grounding leadership in the CA, the pursuit of competitive advantage is reoriented towards enabling workers to flourish while contributing to collective adaptability and justice.

In conclusion, we can say that capability *achievement* depends on the context. Leaders should consider using tools like the CSWQ to tailor interventions to the capabilities of employees [8, 9].

Trust is an important foundation for *developing* capabilities. When leaders demonstrate openness, admit mistakes, and respond appreciatively to input, employees are willing to speak up, take risks, and learn from mistakes [51, 52]. In addition to trust, capability development also requires long-term thinking. Capabilities such as developing new knowledge and skills develop over time and require openness and balancing short-term goals with long-term indicators [56].

Expanding capability sets is facilitated by inclusive leadership [3, 54], which is characterised by participation in decision-making, leading to innovation and better decisions [53], and by supporting both belongingness and uniqueness. For leadership under the capability lens, it implies that psychological safety is a precondition for learning, innovation, and adaptation [51, 57] and that leaders must first listen to capability concerns before structuring them into policy and strategy [55, 58].

For the organisation, it implies that HRM serves as a capability engine: aligning strategic and inclusive HRM so that individual and organisational goals mutually reinforce each other [10]. On the board level, stewardship-based governance emphasises long-term value and fairness rather than short-term control [5, 6].

Actionable Strategies for Decision-Makers

Using the CA means looking beyond resources to the real freedoms people have in their lives.

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Decision-makers can apply the practical strategies outlined next to expand their capabilities. The three domains that were the focus of this chapter are discussed. Furthermore, we are convinced that if organisations and leaders within those organisations apply CA in the manner we have listed, it will provide a method and strategy to cope with unforeseen changes.

It is important that this undertaking to apply the CA, as well as the "actionable strategies" elaborated next, address job security. This concept, based on the ideas and empirical findings of Wolff and de-Shalit [7)], was explained in the introduction to this chapter.

a. *Digitalisation*
   - Employ digital tools to support rather than control workers.
   - Conduct participatory audits of AI systems (focusing on purpose, risks, bias, contestability) [16, 18, 24, 25].
   - Measure capability outcomes regularly and integrate them as a goal into performance and development cycles [51].
     - Diversity and inclusion.
     - Embedding diversity as an asset, not a checkbox.
     - Institutionalise inclusive routines in teams and decision-making [18, 19].
     - Redesign rewards and career systems for employment security and long-term capability growth [10].

b. *Sustainability*
   - Sign just transition agreements with employees and stakeholders [50].
   - Report on both environmental and capability outcomes [40].
   - Develop robust training channels for green skills [40, 50] and ensure that sustainability becomes a shared value, not just a goal.

c. *Co-creation*
   - Involve workers in designing schedules, tasks, and digital tools [51].
   - Normalise capability-oriented conversations in HR and leadership practices [10].

Conclusion: Supporting Human Capabilities in a Changing World

Digitalisation, globalisation, and climate change pose disruptive challenges but also create opportunities for more meaningful, sustainable work. The CA offers a powerful lens to translate these dynamics into just and

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empowering organisational choices. The future of work must align organisational goals with human flourishing: resilience and sustainability are about enabling systems and able people. This is expressed in the central question: do our decisions expand the real freedoms of workers to do the work and to be the persons they have reason to value?

This chapter conceptually illustrates the extension of CA to future work. It illustrates how HRM and (organisational) leadership should foster normative policies that provide a framework for addressing digitalisation, globalisation, and climate change. Research could focus on whether HRM and leadership, designed from a capabilities perspective, lead to more freedoms and well-being for workers. Longitudinal research could investigate whether the capabilities lens delivers the desired results at the work, organisational, and capabilities levels.

This chapter also concludes the book. In this book, we have attempted to demonstrate how the normative and open nature of the CA conceptually aligns it with other models. Moreover, it is suitable for assessing gaps in the acquisition of freedoms and well-being at work. This justice aspect can be strengthened by linking contributive justice to the CA.

The CA proved to be integrative not only at the conceptual level, but also at the organisational levels: at the boardroom level (corporate governance), the operational level (HRM), and the individual employee level (flourishing work). We saw that the CA can identify problems, areas for improvement, and practical solutions at these three organisational levels.

Ultimately, the CA can be applied in various contexts. A key point emerged as the universality of values. This plays a role in the (cross-) cultural perspective, the decolonial position, and leadership, but also in the (related) discussion about whether a universal conceptualisation of "decent work" is possible. We saw a solution in "a universalism enriched by every particular". This is a statement by Césare, but it fundamentally reflects Sen's ideas and pragmatic, situational choice for the perspective of "situation-dependent realisation".

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