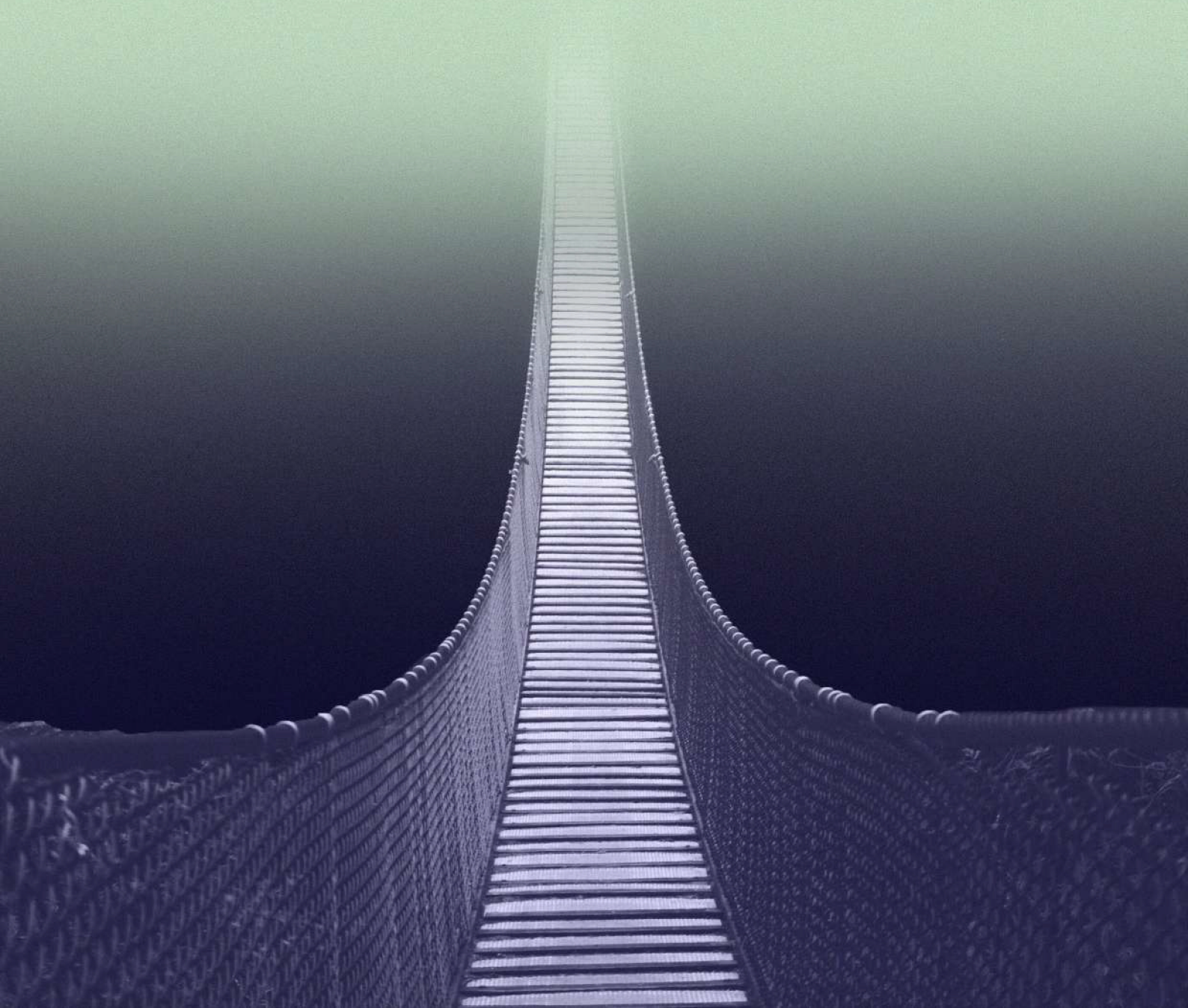


Filling the **Void**

Finding True Purpose
at Work



About *Us*

Global Future is a think tank dedicated to using psychology to provide fearless and original insight into the challenges facing our times. We aim to guide leaders - from businesses to politics, arts and civil society - to ask bigger, deeper questions about how we can best serve our communities.

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Rowenna Davis is a director for Global Future, a writer, a teacher and environmental activist. She grew up in London where she got a lot of her politics from her multi-cultural state school in Cricklewood. She became a campaigning journalist, reporting on social inequalities and the environment. She moved into politics, standing for Labour as a Parliamentary Candidate before serving as a teacher in a secondary school like the one that first inspired her.

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What Am I Doing Here?

John Bines had worked in financial services his whole life. He was successful, hard-working and senior. He had a wife and four children who he could provide for. But he remained irritated by a fundamental question: *What am I actually doing here?* Yes, the pay check was important, but his kids were privileged enough not to need more, whilst others struggled. His courage to stick with this needling question led him to make the leap to a major children's charity. He swallowed a hefty pay cut and - although he's the first to admit he still has to deal with office politics - he stayed in the charity sector, became CEO of Every Child and now works in his local primary school. He says he is happier and more fulfilled now that he can answer that fundamental question of purpose at work:

"Nearly twenty years ago, I reflected on what was important to me" says Bines. "In working with my coach, Kylie Bains, I concluded that I was in the wrong place and decided to do something about it. The subsequent years have been anything but smooth, but they have been enjoyable and fulfilling. And, above all, they have been authentic."



John Bines

John Bines' question - "*What am I actually doing here?*" - is haunting many of us. Finding true purpose at work certainly doesn't have to mean leaving your job, but it can mean shaking things up. Our think tank earlier this year found that 87% of British people now claim that it's important to have meaningful purpose at work.¹ During the Coronavirus lockdowns, over one in three

¹ https://ourglobalfuture.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Global_Future-How_Covid_Changed_Our_Minds.pdf

workers considered changing jobs and a huge 39% of those said they wanted to change to increase their sense of purpose rather than shift their income. We've all heard affluent workers like Bines saying they want to get out of the game, retire early or give something back. This is not new, as the American psychologist Abraham Maslow wrote in 1943², once we're able to fill our stomachs, we can begin to address the void in our souls.

We recognise that the ability to act on this question is a privilege. Lots of us don't have jobs, huge numbers of those of us that do still struggle to put food on the table. Many of us don't work in organisations that make conversations about purpose easy or possible. Our poll found that most of us won't act on our desire to change jobs and the biggest barrier, unsurprisingly, is money. We recognise and support the need for bigger systematic change to give more people the agency to act on aspirations that are meaningful to them. However, this report, right now, is aimed at those with the privileged position of being able to have some degree of power and control over their lives. It is also aimed at leaders who may be in a position to create the conditions for others to find a greater sense of meaning who lack that power.

Global Future is well placed to do this. We are a globally orientated think-tank led by psychologists who have spent decades coaching top CEOs on how to create meaning

'Once we're able to fill our stomachs, we can begin to address the void in our souls.'

at work. We first wrote about purpose 15 years ago in *Meaning Inc: The Blueprint for Business Success in the 21st Century*³, where we documented the rising importance of purpose to both individuals and organisations. We found the magic lies in connecting both.

This process is not easy. Building overlap between personal and organisational purpose is one of the most complex and difficult areas of purpose work. It's taken us thousands of hours to design, test and refine this process that we now use to serve global businesses who are leading in this cutting-edge field.

As with any complex challenge, the first step is to break it down. At Global Future, we often refer to the "Three Cs". First, **clarity** around your personal purpose, an organisational purpose which is **compelling** to you and **creativity** in marrying the two. Whilst no single article can hope to do all of this for you, this report is written with the hope that we can start leaders thinking about that journey, both for themselves and their people who may need support to get there.

² <https://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm>

³ <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Meaning-Inc-blueprint-business-success-ebook/dp/B005IYN7KS>

As you can see from the model below, personal purpose rarely overlaps perfectly with any organisation’s purpose, and it is overly idealistic to aim for this. Rather, the aim is to identify and build overlap between the two in the ‘Impact

Zone’. Where no overlap at all can be found, it may be time to ask serious questions about whether you are able to take the personal and financial risk of changing job completely.

Diagram 01:

Impact Zone Model



Asking whether your current work fits your personal sense of purpose can be uncomfortable, complicated and messy. But it’s worth it. Get this right, and you can unlock a sense of fulfilment, meaning and productivity. But fail to seek the overlap or spend a lifetime fudging it and pretending you fit in at work when you don’t, can end up with huge wasted potential and – most painfully - regret. Repeated

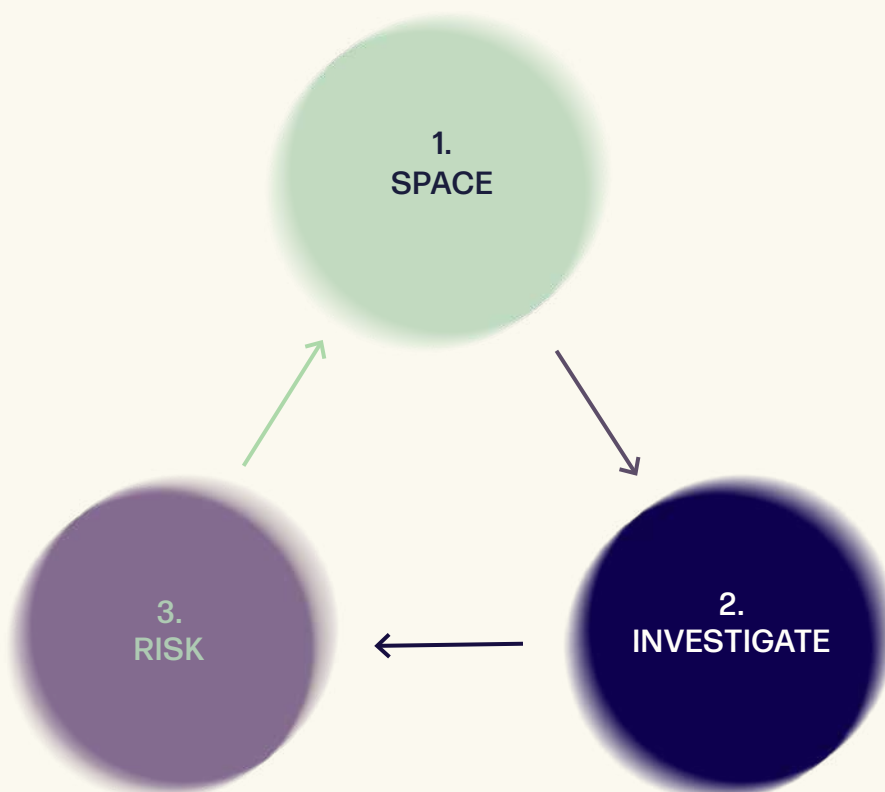
studies of retired people find that regret almost always comes from risks they haven’t taken rather than those they have. One study of retired people in the US for example found that a third regretted not pursuing their dreams⁴. Better to invest time in asking uncomfortable questions now rather than sitting with the painful answers when it’s too late.

⁴ <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20160525005192/en/One-Third-Americans-Regret-Major-Life-Choices-Embrace>

How do I do this?

There is no magic bullet, model or formula that will automatically tell you what to do with your life. “Eureka” moments, when the answer spontaneously hits you without any effort, are also rare. Instead, we propose a guided three step process that will help you break the challenge down and give you some avenues to work with.

The first step is to make yourself some space. Second, you can then investigate what might need to change, leaving you in a position to take the third and final step – taking some informed risks by doing things differently. This process can result in all kinds of experiments for different people, ranging from the way you do your current role to the extreme of changing organisations.



1. SPACE

It is important to note that this process is iterative. Once you've been brave and committed enough to try things differently, you must go back to the first step and create more space to reflect on what you've learned and investigate how you might be able to deepen your sense of meaning at work further again.

This is both the simplest and most underestimated step. Be aware that there are logistical and psychological barriers that prevent us from making the time to do the deep thinking we need to get this right. Today's world is fraught and overcrowded, with most of us juggling long working hours with familial responsibilities. Even if you do find a slot, confronting such big questions can be daunting. The temptation to continue in our regular, safe routines - and their associated well-worn neural pathways in the brain - is easier than building new pathways with their associated discomfort. Far easier to switch on Netflix or recheck WhatsApp than sit with existential questions that could result

'There are logistical and psychological barriers that prevent us from making the time to do the deep thinking we need to get this right...'

in realisations or decisions that unsettle or question your way of life. To help, try scheduling proper time in advance for this process, book someone you trust or a coach to do it with you, and perhaps take time out of your regular environment, either by going for a walk or taking a holiday if that's available to you. Shifts in our environment can help us get off the train tracks of routine life and encourage us to think differently.

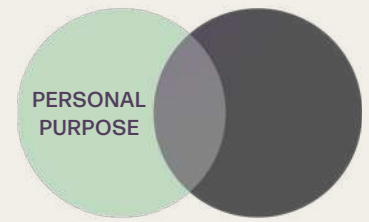
2. INVESTIGATE

Once you've made some space for yourself, you want to reflect on a variety of questions to break down the challenge. Simply asking "Is my job helping me to fulfil my purpose in life?" can be stressful because it is overwhelming. Instead, breaking down the questions into manageable sections - often answering some that may seem slightly tangential - can free you up to think more creatively.

In line with the Impact Zone Model (page 7), we recommend splitting these questions into three categories: questions surrounding **personal purpose and drive**, questions about your **organisation/work's central purpose** and finally questions about the **overlap** between the two. Over the following pages, we will guide you through questions and exercises on these three categories. You can note your answers down privately or have someone you trust interview you.

'Simply asking "Is my job helping me to fulfill my purpose in life" can be stressful because it is overwhelming.

Impact Zone Model



What is my Personal Purpose?

Starting with questions about personal purpose is essential. We must build from the 'inside out'. Without a deep understanding of who we are and what motivates us, we can't make meaningful decisions. Over the years, we have found that true purpose is rarely what you think it's supposed to be, but something specific and unique to you such as being the thorn in peoples' sides or opening doors for others. In order to bring your whole self to this process, these questions are designed to draw both on your past experiences and future aspirations. Your identity is about where you've been as well as where you want to go, so it's important to

PAST

- **What have been the most *formative* and important moments in your life?**
- **What did they teach you about *what matters to you*? Sometimes here a lifeline, creative drawing or collage can help.**
- **What are the *biggest challenges* you've faced in life and what did they teach you about what matters most to you?**
- **What has consistently *driven* you in your life?**
- **What are your *proudest* achievements and why?**

cover both. Next, remember to answer each of these questions as honestly as possible and acknowledge your own ego. It's easy to answer with 'worthy' responses that you think you should say, rather than those that are actually true. If being recognised or celebrated or having a position of authority is meaningful to you, then make sure you acknowledge that. This work is meaningless if it is not authentic. Finally, don't panic if you can't think of a specific, 'perfect' answer to any one of the questions. This is an organic, iterative and dialogical process. Note down the first few things that come to your mind and explore those that feel right. There are no 'wrong' answers.

PRESENT

- **What are you really *passionate* about changing in your life?**
- **When do you feel so *engaged* in an activity that you lose track of time?**
- **What part of your work would you be *proud* to talk about at a dinner party?**

FUTURE

- **What might you *regret* if you don't change in your life?**
- **What would you be *proud* to say you'd achieved at your retirement?**

Visualisation Exercise

This can be a creative way of engaging different parts of your brain to address important questions about what truly inspires you. Your imagination is located in a separate part of your brain to the frontal cortex which deals with rational thought. Using this more emotional side of your mind provides an alternative tool that can help unlock subconscious answers. Visualisation can also be a powerful motivator to keep you going and take risks if you decide there are things you need to change.

Close your eyes and take three deep breaths. Imagine it is five years from now and you are working in a job that really gives you a sense of meaning and happiness.

Where are you physically imagining yourself? What can you see?

What can you hear? What do you feel?

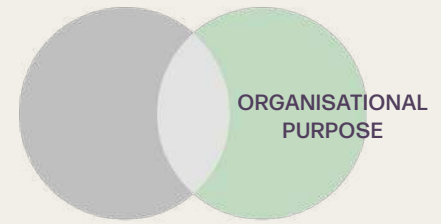
What is the same? What is different? Who are you with?

What does my Organisation Stand for?

Lots of organisations have official purpose statements. This is now fashionable and part of the zeitgeist. However, employees who work inside these organisations are best placed to tell whether these stated purposes are genuine or whether they are simply a sound bite designed to “green wash” the company or satisfy PR. The true purpose of the organisation is what guides decision making, rewards behaviour and would be known and recognised by employees and customers. A bank we were working with once had a stated purpose of being the champion for customer service, however one of their managers said to us, “That’s just a statement for external consumption, we’re really here to rip customers off and we do that by getting them to keep accounts that are profitable for us but don’t necessarily help them.” Unsurprisingly, customer ratings of their service quality was not improving. When working out whether your purpose aligns with your organisation’s, it’s important to see through the stated slogans to the impactful purpose of the institution in question.

Second, it’s important to note that different parts of an organisation may have different purposes. So, for example, one region, hierarchical tier or branch of a large company may have a different purpose from another. It may be useful to separate these out as you may align personally with one part of the organisation more than another.

Impact Zone Model



Finally, it’s worth thinking about the trajectory of your organisation. Some organisations may be struggling but attracting good people of similar values to yourself, giving it hope for the future and a capacity to change. You may yourself be in a position of authority strong enough to shape the organisation’s values so that they better align with your own, or work with a team that can. Other organisations heading in the opposite direction that remain totally closed to change may well be worth leaving.

- **What is the *true purpose* of your organisation?**
- **Is the purpose *rooted* in the organisational history, products and services?**
- **Does the purpose have a *call to action*? Does it drive strategic direction and operational decision making?**
- **What are the *lived values* of your organisation? What behaviours are actually rewarded?**
- **What do the *culture and values* of your organisation tell you about its purpose?**

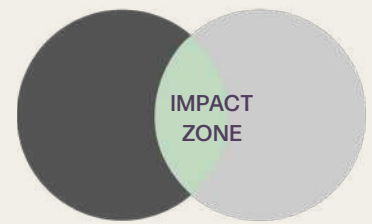
Case Study
The Body Shop

After years of neglecting its activist roots and the DNA established by Anita Roddick, one of our clients, **The Body Shop**, reconnected with its history through emphasising its purpose: *We exist to fight for a fairer and more beautiful world.* Sharing this widely and helping their people find authentic personal connection with it, was galvanising for them, lifted engagement levels and propelled business performance.

How can I align my Personal Purpose with my work?

Remember that no individual fits perfectly into an organisation. The point is not to eradicate all tensions between your purpose and your organisation's, but to be honest and open about where there is an overlap and where there is not. This will give you the greatest chance of exploring how you might be able to expand that 'Impact Zone'.

Impact Zone Model



ASSESSING FIT

- Does your organisation's purpose *inspire* you? Do you want to be part of its realisation?
- Do your *values* overlap with the organisation's *lived values*?
- Do you have *common ground* with other people in your organisation?
- Do you feel true to your *authentic* identity when you talk about what you do?
- Are you only doing this for the money? Could you fit in, be *happier* and more *fulfilled* somewhere else?

BEING CREATIVE ABOUT MAKING IT WORK

- How can you use your purpose to drive some of the *goals* that are valued by your organisation?
- If there is a misalignment between the organisation's stated and genuine purpose, what could you do to help *bridge* the gap? Would that *energise* you?
- Does your organisation have scope to *change*? Is its trajectory better or worse in your opinion? What could you do to be more *proud* of it in five years' time?

3. RISK

Once you've taken the time to truly investigate, examine and reflect on your personal purpose and how much of that is met in your current employment, it's time to think about taking some risks to deepen that alignment. Whether you're already experiencing a high degree of overlap or very little, there is often more you can do to try and build that Impact Zone. All of this involves experimentation and risk.

This action is easier said than done.

Psychologically human beings are wired to feel the pain of losses more than they feel the joy of gains, making us naturally risk averse.⁵ Routines might be dull, but they're also comfortable.

By definition you know you can complete and repeat routine tasks. Change on the other hand almost always involves an element of discomfort: it forces us to face uncertainty and risk failure. But the only way to improve our current position is to try out new and different ways of working, so try and reward yourself for experimenting regardless of the result. This could be anything from a glass of wine with a friend to a trip or a party – human motivation requires rewards.

The scale of change you might want to make depends on your current situation, personal preference and risk appetite. There is a whole

spectrum of actions you could take. For those individuals who already find a great deal of purpose at work, you may simply want to make a few basic adjustments. This could for example include delegating parts of your job that are less meaningful to you, but may be developmental or meaningful for others. For others at the opposite end of the spectrum with little to no overlap, you might want to consider changing jobs or retraining altogether if those options are available to you. If you are not in the privileged position of being able to change your job, then there may be ways of finding more meaning outside of work such as volunteering, caring for others, or hobbies.

Between these two extreme sets of actions are a whole host of other options that you could experiment with. Perhaps you could ask to move to another section of the organisation, take a year's sabbatical, complete work experience somewhere else in your free time, have an honest conversation with a manager about how you could shift your current role or train your way up to a position that might better suit you. Be prepared to take responsibility - in some cases you may simply need to reprioritise your work load so you can focus on what's important. Remember, you can always start with small actions and then review.

⁵ <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/p/prospecttheory.asp>

Success Stories

Andre, CEO of a FTSE100 company, has had a long-standing interest in creating purpose and meaning for people at work. He has deepened this by changing his organisation's purpose which now reads - to bring quality, safety and sustainability to life, now and for future generations. It shapes everything the company does and how they do it. Every meeting now starts with a sustainability moment and the company's move to being more purpose driven has been exceptionally galvanising for its people.

Suzanna, a global CFO, knew she had strengths around analysis, intellectual rigour and in bringing the unvarnished truth to the table in the senior team. She moved closer to the purpose Impact Zone by developing metrics for tracking the progress of her company against its key purpose goals.

Siobhan, a lawyer, found that protecting the environment was key to her personal purpose, but that her legal work provided little opportunity to make a difference in this space. She discussed this with her CEO and they incorporated responsibility for the company's sustainability agenda into her role.

Rajiv, a human resources professional, took his purpose: 'To help others flourish in a personally meaningful way', to a more impactful level by refocusing the main goals of the talent and leadership development function around helping people to connect their own sense of purpose to the organisation's purpose.

Jo, an engineer and Technical Director, has a purpose 'to constantly seek real answers and step into the unknown in order to make a difference and push for change'. When her company focused its purpose on reinventing the construction industry, she seized the opportunity to help find innovative ways of connecting safety and efficiency with human behaviour, as well as paving the way for women to succeed in the industry.

Where do I go from here?

It's essential to remember that finding true purpose at work is a constant journey. It is utopian to believe that our personal and career goals will be perfectly aligned throughout our lives. Apart from anything else, what matters to us most changes over time and that can force us to re-evaluate even the most meaningful work. Our **Impact Zone Model** gets to the heart of what keeps people awake at night and what they really want out of their careers. However, finding true purpose at work is a privileged but also challenging process. As the cyclical process of Space, Investigate and Risk demonstrates, it's important to reiterate this process to make it a lived, impactful exercise rather than a one-off event that gets forgotten. Once you've identified opportunities to live your purpose at work more authentically and taken some risks, you need to create more space to evaluate how those experiments went, whether they are paying off, and what might be trialled next.

Our experience at Global Future Partners shows that support on a number of fronts is important in enabling and embedding this purpose journey. At the personal level, the process is supported by individual coaching and purpose workshops that help people explore living their purpose at work in a way that is tangible and has authentic resonance with them. At the organisational level, it requires the development of a purpose that is both rooted and invigorating as well as senior

'Apart from anything else, what matters to us most changes over time and that can force us to re-evaluate even the most meaningful work.'

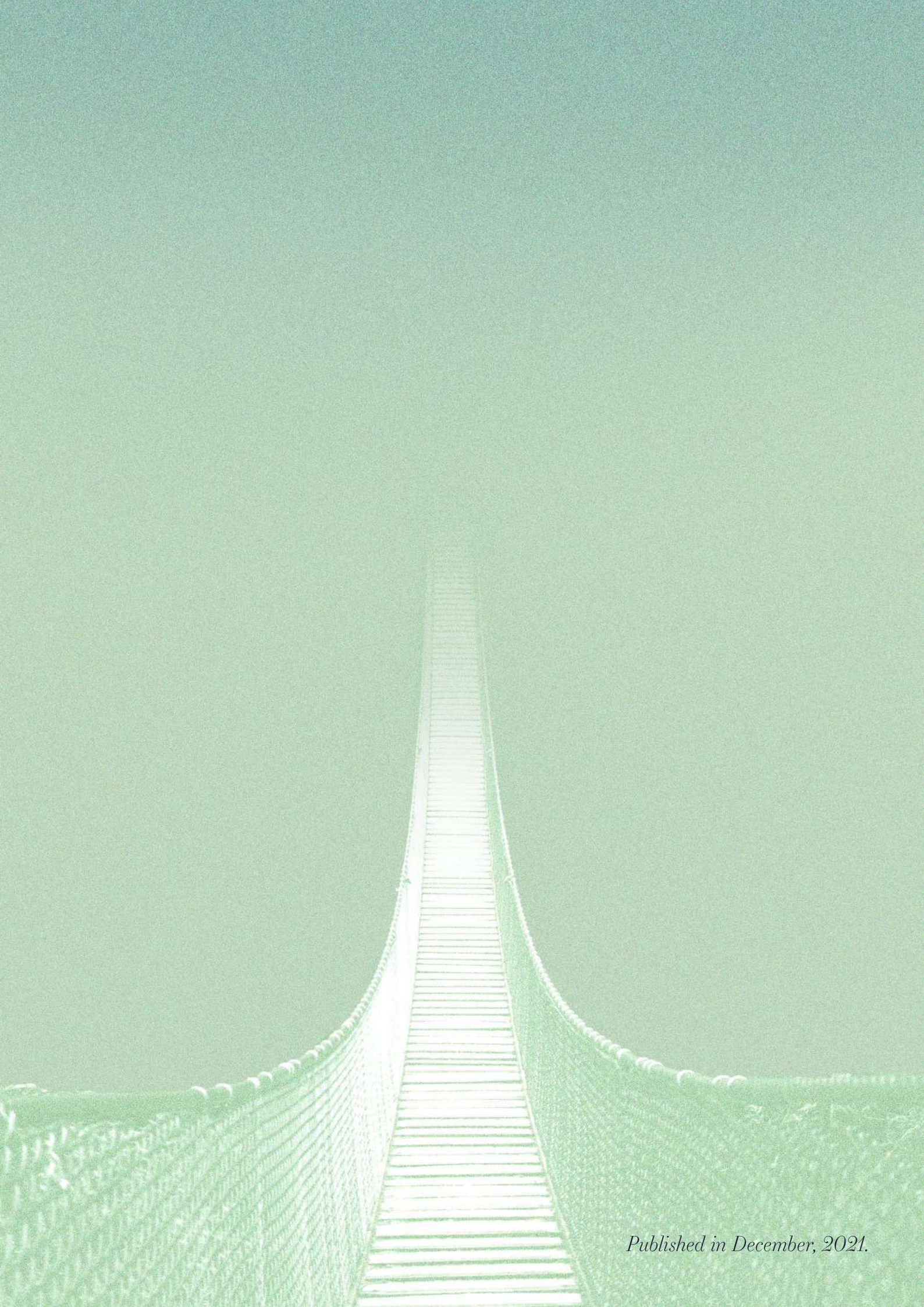
leaders role modelling how they are expanding their 'impact zones'.

John Bines is a case in point. He is a model case study because he had the courage to leave a conventionally successful job for a new role in a very different sector. He said he had no regrets about the risks he took and he hopes there are communities across the world who are better off because he took the jump. But even now he continues to be restless in the pursuit of what matters to him. After years in senior roles in large charities, he decided he would gain a greater sense of purpose from frontline work, so he shifted once again and is now working in his local primary school. This continuous evolution makes him more, not less, successful. He has the tenacity to continue growing and following his heart rather than sticking to the train tracks to retirement. As he told us, even if his shifts haven't been plain sailing, "they have been authentic".

What do we have to gain?

Whether you're a CEO or a frontline worker, aligning your personal sense of purpose with your work can release huge amounts of energy. It can guide and focus your priorities, increase morale, boost motivation, meaning and productivity. It can be used to break down and evaluate existing workloads, shift roles or industries and build towards a more productive use of time. Navigating through this process can be messy and complex, particularly when you dare to leave behind simpler financial incentives and enter the more complicated, diverse world of social good. But the reward is also great. If we collectively get this right, then we are not just likely to be more productive at work and have a richer sense of meaning with fewer regrets, we will also have a better chance of meeting the huge global challenges facing us today.

'If we collectively get this right...we will [also] have a better chance of meeting the huge global challenges facing us today.'



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