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Relational Closeness Through long-term Interaction among Local Actors in Batik Lasem Cultural Practices Samantha E. Claudya^{1*}, Candida Jau Emang²

¹ Communications Studies, Faculty of Law & Communications, Universitas Katolik Soegijapranata, Jl. Pawiyatan Luhur Sel. IV No.1, Bendan Duwur, Kec. Gajahmungkur, Kota Semarang, Jawa Tengah 50234

² Cinematography Programme, Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak.

*Corresponding author's email address: samantha@unika.ac.id¹

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ABSTRACT

Long-term interaction plays a crucial role in fostering relational closeness within community-based cultural practices. This qualitative interpretive study examines interpersonal communication among local actors in Batik Lasem using Relational Dialectics Theory. Data from focus group discussions and in-depth interviews reveal that sustained interaction, shared experiences, and flexible work practices cultivate family-like relationships while preserving structured work roles. This extends interpersonal communication scholarship by explaining relational closeness as a dynamic communicative process embedded in everyday cultural work.

ABSTRAK

Interaksi jangka panjang berperan penting dalam membentuk kedekatan relasional pada praktik budaya berbasis komunitas. Penelitian kualitatif interpretif ini mengkaji komunikasi antarpribadi aktor Batik Lasem menggunakan Relational Dialectics Theory, menunjukkan bahwa interaksi berkelanjutan, pengalaman bersama, dan praktik kerja yang fleksibel membangun hubungan layaknya keluarga tanpa menghilangkan struktur peran.



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INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal communication plays a fundamental role in shaping social relationships within community-based cultural practices, particularly in contexts where work and everyday life are closely intertwined (Liu, et al., 2025). In Indonesia, Batik Lasem represents a distinctive cultural practice in which batik production is sustained through continuous interaction among artisans, workers, and business owners across generations. Rather than relying solely on formal organizational structures, the production process is embedded in everyday communication that fosters familiarity, cooperation, and shared experiences among local. Consequently, interpersonal communication provides an important perspective for understanding how cultural practices are maintained, negotiated, and reproduced within local communities (Assegaff, et al., 2024).

Previous studies have examined communication in cultural and community-based settings primarily from organizational and strategic perspectives, emphasizing message management, stakeholder engagement, and cultural promotion (Kriyantono, 2020). Although these studies have enriched the understanding of communication in cultural organizations, they have paid limited attention to the interpersonal processes through which relationships are constructed and sustained among local actors in everyday cultural practices. Likewise, studies on Batik Lasem have predominantly focused on cultural heritage preservation, economic development, and the creative industry, while providing limited explanation of how long-term interaction develops into relational closeness through everyday communication among artisans and workers (Wibowo, et al., 2026). This limitation indicates the need to investigate the communicative processes that underlie relational development in community-based cultural work settings.

Cultural work settings are environments in which the production of cultural goods is shaped not only by creative skills and economic activities but also by locally embedded histories, work arrangements, and social relationships. Studies of craft labor demonstrate that artisanal production cannot be fully understood as an isolated technical or commercial activity because the meaning and organization of work emerge through social and material relationships within the production setting (Viganò, et al., 2023; Rondi, et al., 2024). Craft economies are also influenced by local cultural histories that shape how workers, owners, and communities understand the value and organization of creative labour (Kofler & Walder, 2024). Consequently, community-based cultural work settings provide spaces where production

activities intersect with everyday communication, shared obligations, and continuing interpersonal relationships.

Batik Lasem represents such a cultural work setting because its production has developed within the long-standing social and cultural relationships of the Lasem community. Previous research describes Lasem as a multicultural coastal area shaped by sustained interaction between Javanese and Chinese communities, with acculturation expressed through batik, language, architecture, rituals, and everyday social life (Basiroen & Manuaba, 2022). The development of the Batik Lasem industry has likewise involved relationships among Chinese and Javanese entrepreneurs, artisans, and workers who gradually constructed openness, togetherness, and a shared identity as members of the Lasem community (Laili & Masruroh, 2017). Batik Lasem should therefore be understood not merely as a heritage textile or creative industry product but as a culturally embedded work practice in which production, community history, and interpersonal relationships continuously intersect.

Within Batik Lasem communities, production activities are organized through flexible work arrangements that encourage continuous interaction over extended periods. Such interaction is embedded in shared routines, collective experiences, and long-term collaboration, allowing interpersonal relationships to develop beyond formal employment arrangements. Although each actor remains aware of their respective work roles, communication frequently evolves into family-like relationships characterized by familiarity, mutual trust, and social support. These characteristics suggest a distinctive relational context in which relational closeness coexists with structured work relationships without eliminating role boundaries.

Such conditions raise important questions regarding how relational closeness develops and is sustained within structured work environments. Interpersonal communication theories acknowledge that relationships evolve through repeated interaction over time (Fuchs & Reichel, 2023). However, limited studies have explained the communicative mechanism through which sustained interaction produces relational closeness while structured work roles remain intact, particularly within community-based cultural settings. Addressing this issue is important because it extends understanding of interpersonal communication beyond relationship outcomes by explaining how relational meaning is continuously negotiated through everyday interactions within culturally embedded work environments.

This study examines how relational closeness develops through long-term interaction among local actors in Batik Lasem cultural practices using a qualitative interpretive approach. By positioning Batik Lasem as an empirical context, this study contributes to interpersonal communication scholarship by extending the application of Relational Dialectics Theory to

culturally embedded work relationships characterized by long-term interaction and flexible social structures. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question: “*How does relational closeness develop through long-term interaction among local actors in Batik Lasem cultural practices?*”

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Relational closeness should not be treated as an automatic outcome of time spent together. In workplace scholarship, close personal ties are distinguished from routine collegial contact by mutuality, emotional significance, and communication that recognizes coworkers as unique individuals rather than solely as role occupants (Chory & Horan, 2023). Moreover, recent network evidence indicates that closeness does not produce uniform consequences because its associations with identification and well-being differ between advice and friendship ties (Yue et al., 2026). Thus, long-term interaction provides opportunities for closeness, but duration alone does not explain how relationships acquire meaning.

This distinction is particularly important in cultural work settings, where work simultaneously constitutes an economic activity and a cultural practice. Contemporary craft research demonstrates that cultural and commercial meanings cannot be cleanly separated but are continuously revalued through how cultural products are created, used, and circulated (Berta, 2025). In Batik Lasem, repeated interaction therefore occurs within a culturally meaningful production system. Shared routines may generate familiarity and trust, yet these outcomes must be interpreted as communicatively constructed rather than assumed consequences of community continuity.

Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) provides a critical lens for examining this construction because it conceptualizes relationships as constituted through ongoing meaning-making and the interplay of competing discourses. Recent RDT scholarship confirms that relational meanings emerge contextually rather than from stable or universally harmonious relational states (Thomas & Scharp, 2026). Within work relationships, tensions such as connection (autonomy and equality) hierarchy are not necessarily signs of interpersonal conflict; instead, they are structural contradictions through which actors negotiate collaboration, identity, and authority (Mikkola et al., 2025). This perspective prevents family-like closeness from being interpreted as evidence that power and role differences have disappeared.

This study conceptualizes relational closeness in Batik Lasem as a negotiated communicative accomplishment. Long-term interaction creates temporal continuity and shared experiences,

while everyday communication assigns relational meaning to these experiences. Closeness develops as local actors construct familiarity, belonging, and mutual recognition while continuing to acknowledge owner–worker responsibilities. The analytical focus is therefore not merely whether prolonged interaction produces closeness, but how cultural meanings, interpersonal communication, and role-based dialectics jointly sustain closeness without dissolving structured work relationships.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach to explore how relational closeness develops through long-term interaction among local actors involved in Batik Lasem cultural practices. A qualitative interpretive design enables the researcher to understand how participants construct meanings from their everyday communication experiences (Anggraini & Sugiyanto, 2021). The study examines interpersonal relationships as communicative processes that evolve through sustained interaction rather than as fixed social conditions. Accordingly, the researcher focuses on how relational closeness is developed and maintained within structured work relationships among Batik Lasem artisans and workers. This approach allows the interpretation of relational experiences from the participants' perspectives.

Data were collected from 8 participants in one Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and 2 in-depth interviews conducted with Batik Lasem business owners with extensive experience in local batik production. Participants were selected using purposive sampling because they were directly involved in long-term interpersonal interaction within Batik Lasem cultural practices. The selection criteria included active involvement in batik production, prolonged work experience, and continuous communication with other local actors. The profiles of all participants and their relevance to the study are presented in Table 1. This sampling strategy ensured that each participant could provide information relevant to the research objectives.

Table 1. Informant Profile

Informant Code	Informant Name	Informant Profile	Relevance to the Study
FGD 1	Participant 1	Batik worker, long-term experience in batik production	Represents everyday interpersonal interaction among workers
FGD 2	Participant 2	Batik worker, involved in manual batik process	Provides insight into communication in work practices
FGD 3	Participant 3	Batik artisan, experienced in pattern-making	Explains relational interaction in production activities

Informant Code	Informant Name	Informant Profile	Relevance to the Study
FGD 4	Participant 4	Batik worker, involved in the coloring process	Describes communication patterns in collaborative work
FGD 5	Participant 5	Batik worker, long-term involvement in batik activities	Reflects sustained interaction among workers
FGD 6	Participant 6	Batik artisan, family-based work experience	Shows relational closeness in work setting
FGD 7	Participant 7	Batik worker, daily interaction with artisans	Provides perspective on communication routines
FGD 8	Participant 8	Batik worker, experienced in traditional batik process	Supports understanding of long-term interaction
INT 1	Batik Purnomo	Batik business owner / artisan	Provides perspective on structured work relationships
INT 2	Batik Maranatha	Batik business owner / artisan	Explains interaction between owner and workers

Source: Author, 2026

The FGD was conducted to capture collective perspectives and shared communication experiences among batik workers, whereas the in-depth interviews explored individual interpretations of relational communication from the perspectives of Batik Purnomo and Batik Maranatha as business owners. All data collection activities were conducted directly in Lasem, Central Java, allowing the researcher to observe the communicative context in which interpersonal relationships developed. Each interview and FGD session was audio-recorded with participants' permission and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Combining FGD and interview data enabled the researcher to compare collective interaction patterns with individual experiences, thereby enriching the interpretation of relational processes.

The data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to long-term interaction and relational closeness (Naeem et al., 2023). The researcher repeatedly reviewed the interview and FGD transcripts to become familiar with the data before generating initial codes. Similar codes were then grouped into broader categories representing recurring communication patterns and relational experiences among participants. These categories were then refined into overarching themes that reflected the communicative processes underlying relational closeness. Finally, the themes were interpreted using Relational Dialectics Theory to explain how interpersonal relationships were negotiated and sustained within structured work settings. Member checking was also conducted by confirming the interpretations with selected participants to ensure that the findings accurately represented their experiences (Marlina, et al., 2024).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Relational Closeness through Long-Term Interaction

Interpersonal relationships among local actors in Batik Lasem develop through long-term interaction that occurs over decades. Informants describe that they have worked together since a young age and continue until old age. This sustained interaction creates familiarity and shared experiences among actors. Participants emphasize that their relationships extend beyond formal work roles. As a result, relational closeness becomes a natural outcome of long-term interaction.

"Mulai S.D... sampai sekarang sudah 42 tahun" (FGD1, 2025)

"Mas Gustaf itu masih SD saya sudah disini, sampai sekarang" (FGD2, 2025)

"Ada yang di generasi zamannya Mami... sampai sekarang ada" (INT2, 2025)

Participants also describe that long-term interaction builds emotional attachment within their relationships. They perceive their relationships as close because they have interacted continuously over time. Informants express that their relationships resemble family relationships. This condition emerges from repeated interaction and shared life experiences. Therefore, relational closeness is formed gradually through sustained interaction.

"Seperti saudara sendiri... antara bos sama karyawan gak ada bedanya." (FGD3, 2025)

"Senang karena kerjanya sama keluarganya Batik Purnomo." (INT1, 2025)

Relational Closeness within Structured Work Relationships

Relational closeness develops within structured work relationships where roles remain clearly defined. Informants acknowledge the presence of differences between owners and workers. However, these differences do not limit communication among actors. Participants understand their positions while maintaining informal interaction. This indicates that role structure does not create distance in relationships.

"Bedane cuman bos dan karyawan tapi soal bicara biasa" (FGD4, 2025)

"Semua motif, desain, warna semua saya yang mengatur" (INT2, 2025)

Participants explain that communication occurs naturally without rigid boundaries. They interact freely in daily activities while still respecting role-based responsibilities. Informants do not perceive hierarchy as a barrier to interpersonal communication. Instead, they maintain

closeness within existing structures. Therefore, relational closeness and structured roles coexist in everyday interaction.

"Kalau kepengen ngobrol ya ngobrol" (FGD5, 2025)

"Kebanyakan sesuai dengan arahan saya" (INT2, 2025)

Relational Closeness Supported by Flexible Work Practices

Relational closeness is reinforced by flexible work practices among local actors. Informants explain that work systems allow them to manage personal and family responsibilities. This flexibility enables them to continue working while maintaining their daily lives. Participants describe that interaction is not limited to the workplace. As a result, relationships extend beyond formal work settings.

"Kalau punya pekerjaan di rumah bisa libur... nanti masuk lagi" (FGD6, 2025)

"Enaknya di sini mau libur mau masuk, tergantung yang batik" (FGD7, 2025)

Participants also describe that flexible work systems support continuous interaction. They can remain connected even when working from different locations. Informants explain that work can be done at home while maintaining coordination with others. This condition allows interaction to continue over time. Therefore, relational closeness is sustained through flexible interaction patterns.

"Pembatiknya disebar ke rumah-rumah... dikerjakan di rumah" (INT1, 2025)

Minimal Conflict and Harmony in Interpersonal Interaction

Interpersonal communication among actors is characterized by minimal conflict in daily interaction. Informants report that conflict rarely occurs in their work environment. They describe their work as comfortable and without tension. Participants emphasize that maintaining good relationships is important. This condition contributes to relational stability over time.

"Nggak pernah ngeluh... kerjaan santai" (FGD8, 2025)

Participants also indicate that communication is adjusted to maintain harmony. They avoid behaviors that may disrupt relationships. Informants prioritize maintaining good interpersonal relations in their interaction. This reflects shared norms in communication practices. Therefore, relational closeness is supported by harmonious interaction.

Relational Closeness as an Outcome of Long-Term Interaction

The findings indicate that relational closeness among local actors in Batik Lasem is not merely the result of prolonged interaction but develops through continuous communicative processes embedded in everyday cultural work practices. Participants consistently described working together for decades, beginning from childhood or early adulthood and continuing throughout their working lives. These long-term interactions enable individuals to accumulate shared experiences, establish recurring communication routines, and develop mutual understanding that extends beyond formal workplace relationships. Rather than functioning solely as repeated encounters, sustained interaction creates a communicative environment in which interpersonal relationships gradually acquire deeper relational significance. Such findings are reflected in the following statements:

“Mulai S.D... sampai sekarang sudah 42 tahun” (FGD1, 2025)

“Mas Gustaf itu masih SD saya sudah disini, sampai sekarang” (FGD2, 2025)

From the perspective of Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT), these findings demonstrate that relationships are constituted through ongoing communication rather than existing as fixed interpersonal states (Baxter, et al, 2021). Mikkola, et al., (2025) argues that relational meaning is continuously produced through discourse, where individuals negotiate how they understand themselves and others within a relationship. In the Batik Lasem community, repeated conversations, collaborative production activities, and everyday interactions become discursive spaces in which participants collectively construct meanings of familiarity, trust, and togetherness. In this study, relational closeness should be understood not as an automatic consequence of spending many years together, but as the outcome of communicative meaning-making that occurs throughout sustained interaction.

This interpretation also expands the understanding of long-term interaction proposed in interpersonal relationship studies. West et al. (2022) explain that relationships develop through the accumulation of shared experiences that provide common interpretive resources for future communication. Similarly, Szczuka et al., (2026) argues that relational intimacy emerges because repeated interaction allows individuals to establish trust, reciprocity, and emotional attachment over time. The present findings support these perspectives while extending them into the context of community-based cultural work. Within Batik Lasem, shared work experiences are inseparable from cultural routines, collective production practices, and local

social norms, indicating that relational closeness is simultaneously shaped by interpersonal communication and the socio-cultural environment in which interaction occurs.

An important implication of these findings is that long-term interaction does not eliminate relational differences among participants. Business owners and workers continue to recognize their respective responsibilities and organizational positions, yet these distinctions rarely interrupt interpersonal communication. Instead, participants negotiate connectedness while maintaining role differentiation in everyday interaction. This pattern reflects the connectedness–autonomy dialectic proposed by Baxter and Montgomery (1996), where relational partners continuously balance the desire for closeness with the recognition of individual identities and social roles (Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2022). However, unlike many organizational settings in which dialectical tensions are expressed through negotiation or conflict, the dialectical process in Batik Lasem operates implicitly through shared cultural values emphasizing harmony, mutual respect, and relational continuity.

Taken together, these findings suggest that relational closeness should be interpreted as a communicative process rather than merely a relational outcome. Long-term interaction provides the temporal condition through which shared experiences accumulate, while everyday communication enables participants to negotiate relational meanings that gradually strengthen connectedness. Therefore, the primary contribution of this study is not simply to demonstrate that long-term interaction produces relational closeness, but to explain how communicative meaning-making transforms sustained interaction into enduring interpersonal relationships within community-based cultural practices.

Relational Closeness as Personal and Family-Like Relationships

The findings further show that relational closeness develops into more personal and meaningful relationships over time. Informants describe their relationships not only as work-related but also as resembling family relationships. This indicates that long-term interaction does not only produce familiarity but also enables the accumulation of shared experiences that shape relational meaning. In this context, relational closeness is constructed through everyday interaction rather than formal organizational structures. Such findings are reflected in the following statements:

“Seperti saudara sendiri... antara bos sama karyawan gak ada bedanya (FGD3, 2025)

“Senang karena kerjanya sama keluarganya Batik Purnomo” (INT1, 2025)

Rather than suggesting the disappearance of organizational roles, these findings illustrate how relational meanings are continuously negotiated through everyday communication. According to Relational Dialectics Theory, interpersonal relationships are constituted through the coexistence of competing relational discourses rather than the dominance of a single relational orientation (Rodrigue, 2023). In the Batik Lasem context, participants simultaneously experienced connectedness through family-like relationships and autonomy through ongoing recognition of work responsibilities. This coexistence demonstrates that relational closeness is sustained because actors negotiate interpersonal meanings without dissolving role distinctions embedded in the production process.

The empirical findings also suggest that flexible work arrangements strengthen this communicative process. Home-based production, flexible work schedules, and extended collaboration create opportunities for frequent interpersonal interaction beyond formal workplace routines. These conditions enable participants to maintain communication across both professional and personal contexts, reinforcing familiarity, reciprocity, and relational continuity over time.

This interpretation extends previous interpersonal communication studies that associate relational closeness primarily with repeated interaction and emotional (Hall, et al., 2022). While these perspectives emphasize the importance of shared experiences, the present findings demonstrate that relational closeness is also sustained through the communicative negotiation of organizational roles within community-based cultural practices. In other words, participants do not become close because formal structures disappear; rather, they remain close because communication enables them to reinterpret these structures through shared relational meanings.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings broaden the application of Relational Dialectics Theory within community-based cultural work settings. Previous applications of RDT frequently describe dialectical tensions as explicit negotiations between opposing relational needs. However, the Batik Lasem context demonstrates that connectedness and autonomy may coexist implicitly through culturally embedded communication practices emphasizing harmony, mutual respect, and relational continuity.

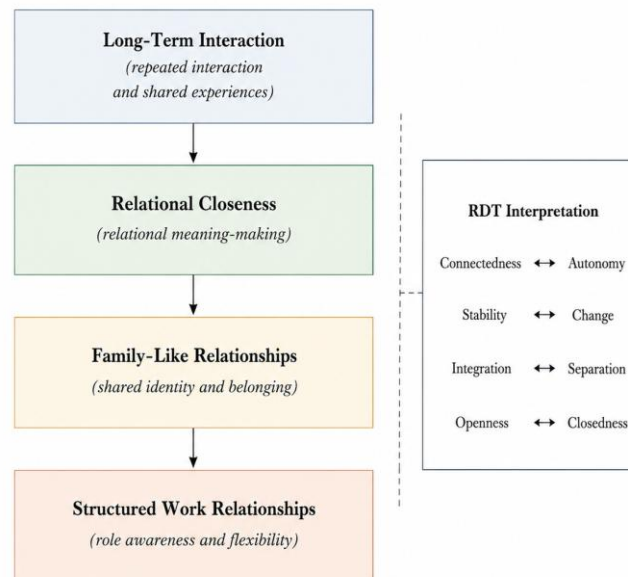


Figure 1. Communicative Development of Relational Closeness in Batik Lasem through Relational Dialectics Theory (Author, 2026)

The Figure 1 summarizes the relationship between the empirical findings and the study's analytical discussion. It synthesizes the study's analytical argument by illustrating the communicative mechanism through which relational closeness develops and is sustained within the Batik Lasem community. Rather than serving as a descriptive summary of the findings, the figure integrates the four empirical themes into a coherent communicative process that explains how relational closeness develops and is sustained within the Batik Lasem community. The left side of the figure presents the progression of the empirical findings, whereas the right side situates these findings within the dialectical perspective of RDT. Together, both components demonstrate that relational closeness is understood as an ongoing communicative process rather than a fixed interpersonal condition.

The figure begins with long-term interaction, which represents the empirical condition in which participants engage in repeated communication over many years. Through these continuous interactions, individuals accumulate shared experiences that gradually strengthen relational closeness. As communication becomes part of everyday routines, participants develop shared understandings that are reflected in family-like relationships characterized by familiarity, trust, and mutual belonging. Importantly, these relationships persist within structured work contexts, where role awareness, flexible work practices, and interpersonal harmony enable relational closeness to be maintained without eliminating organizational boundaries.

The right panel illustrates how this communicative process is interpreted through the lens of Relational Dialectics Theory. Rather than representing separate stages of relationship

development, the four dialectical pairs operate throughout the entire communicative process. The empirical findings indicate that connectedness, stability, integration, and openness become the dominant orientations shaping everyday interaction, while autonomy, change, separation, and closedness remain present as implicit relational dimensions. Rather than producing overt conflict, these opposing orientations are continually negotiated through communication, reflecting Baxter's (2011) argument that interpersonal relationships are constituted by ongoing dialogue and the coexistence of multiple relational discourses.

Taken together, the conceptual synthesis highlights the principal contribution of this study. The figure demonstrates that relational closeness is not simply the result of prolonged interaction or emotional attachment, but emerges through continuous communicative negotiation embedded within everyday cultural work practices. By integrating the empirical findings with Relational Dialectics Theory, the figure provides a contextually grounded explanation of interpersonal communication in Batik Lasem and illustrates how relational closeness can be understood as a dynamic process sustained through long-term interaction, shared relational meanings, and structured work relationships.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that relational closeness among local actors in Batik Lasem develops through long-term interaction embedded in everyday work practices. Sustained interaction enables familiarity and shared experience, which gradually evolve into family-like relationships through communicative meaning-making. These relationships are not separated from work structures, as actors maintain role awareness while sustaining interpersonal closeness. Thus, relational closeness emerges as a dynamic process shaped by interaction, experience, and relational context.

This study confirms that the research objective has been achieved by explaining how relational closeness develops through long-term interaction. The findings contribute to interpersonal communication studies by demonstrating that relational closeness can coexist with structured roles without generating visible tension. The study also highlights the importance of everyday communication practices in sustaining relational bonds within community-based work settings. Future research may explore similar relational processes in different cultural or organizational contexts to extend the applicability of these findings.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study is limited by its focus on a specific cultural setting and does not account for variations across work systems or communication environments, which may restrict the transferability of its findings. Future research should examine relational communication across more diverse organizational, industrial, structural, and cultural contexts, particularly in relation to changing work patterns and generational dynamics.

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