“Disruption” is one of the most overhyped concepts of the last ten years. A Google Trend search for “disruptive innovation” shows a steeply rising graph, and you can hardly open a professional news website without reading stories about whole sectors being disrupted. Given that “business as usual” is apparently undergoing a profound transformation, how this will impact the people doing the actual work in our economy? One logical consequence is that the way people work and earn money will also radically change. How this will be different is a direct result of the new dominant organization model that is currently emerging.

What do YouTube, Airbnb, and bitcoin have in common that distinguishes them from CNN, Hilton Hotels, and the average bank? The answer is that the former are all platforms. We are witnessing the death of the decades-old industrial organization model, which is being replaced by the organization model of the 21st century: the platform.

What makes a platform a platform? Patrick Savalle’s 2008 book TeamPark: From Crowd to Community lays out the parameters of the platform organization model. It describes how a platform organization provides an infrastructure for crowds of people to create value through an organic rather than a mechanical bureaucratic process. Communication on a platform follows the biological principle of “stigmergy,” which is how ants manage to perform complex tasks without central command and control.

Typically, a platform organizational model has these three features:

Crowdsourcing of resources: Whether it’s a room on Airbnb or knowledge on Wikipedia, the value on a platform is created by mobilizing resources that aren’t necessarily owned or controlled by the organization itself. A major advantage of the platform is that it doesn’t have to invest in all of these resources. Its reason for existence is simply to create synergies between them.

Asynchronous communication: Millions of people simultaneously drive their cars on the road every day without linear planning and direct communication between them. In much the same way, large groups of people can also perform complex tasks on a platform together without having to coordinate their communication in real-time, or even having to meet. For example, Github is home to millions of software repositories, which are often produced by open source developers.

Self-organization: As the behavior on the platform is organic instead of pre-planned, it might create never imagined results. Who could have imagined the incredible diversity in the iTunes App Store, for example?

The direct consequence for the future of work is that the 21st-century office is the platform, without physical boundaries that bind people and teams unilaterally to one location or project. Online platforms are where people will go to add value, and get paid for it. Millions of people are already collaborating productively every day on social networks, forums, Q&As, wikis and other collaboration platforms. This is why mainstream corporations are now heavily investing in “social” intranets, which are essentially platforms to utilize these powerful tools for the internal organization. But companies are generally trying to fit these social technologies into traditional industrial processes and procedures, creating a strict line between inside and outside. Obviously, this is not going to work.
It’s necessary for businesses to completely rethink their processes and how they reward people, which also means that they should stop rewarding based on linear metrics such as time and predefined and assigned tasks. On a platform, everyone is rewarded based on the actual value they produce. A beautiful example of this is GiffGaff, a U.K.-based telecom operator that pays its customers for running its customer support platform. The company also crowdsources sales from its customers and offers financial rewards for referrals.

The crowdsourcing of labor through platforms is still in its infancy and is not yet at the heart of organizational planning. It is, however, gaining considerable mainstream traction in diverse areas ranging from software development to open innovation, from help desks to content creation. Companies like Google and Samsung are paying serious money to freelancers and to their own internal developers to contribute on the Github platform to open source software projects like Linux. A corporate giant like Unilever uses oDesk to facilitate its flexible workforce policy. London’s top university, Imperial College, uses its community of students and alumni to crowdsource research for corporate clients, and distributes the fees among the contributors using Mobbr’s crowd payment functionality.

One of the corporate frontrunners in crowdsourcing labor is General Electric. It has partnered with Quirky to crowdsource product innovation. It uses the data scientist community Kaggle to crowdsource algorithms for air travel flight paths and uses GrabCad to crowdsource engineering solutions. FirstBuild, through its partnership with crowd-based car manufacturer Local Motors, takes crowdsourcing a step further. It uses a crowd of professionals and enthusiasts to ideate, design, prototype, refine, build and commercialize home appliances.

FirstBuild itself is merely the platform that facilitates the entire flow of value. It offers proof that crowdsourcing is not something that is only done online — and shows that it may well be the template for the future of work in the 21st century.