Work Will Not Disappear.
So We Should Make It Better

Workers everywhere worry about the future of their jobs. After all, for the vast majority, income from paid employment (in one form or another) is the dominant means to provide for the necessities of life. The availability, stability, and earning potential of paid work are essential to our well-being.

The world of work is being transformed by technology: machines and computers can perform ever-more complex tasks (including those involving judgment and learning), reigniting age-old fears that workers will be replaced by machines. Of course, workers have worried about machines taking their jobs since the dawn of capitalism. In historical experience, technological change by itself does not produce long-lasting unemployment: unemployment certainly does exist, but usually for other reasons (like failed macroeconomic policies). But technological change certainly causes dislocation and hardship for certain groups of workers – and the resulting costs are much worse if affected workers don’t get alternative job opportunities, mobility assistance, and retraining.

There is nothing inevitable about how technology is developed, applied, and managed; the impacts of technology depend entirely on choices made regarding its design, implementation, and management. At present, most of those decisions are made unilaterally by the owners and top managers of private businesses, who have free rein (in most countries) to choose what technologies are implemented, to what ends, and who bears the resulting costs and benefits. Perhaps we should be less concerned with technology, and more with the unbalanced decision-making structure within which technology is presently governed.

Moreover, technology is not the only force transforming the world of work. The organisational and social context of work is also in major flux. Indeed, changes in work organisation and employment relations are having a more immediate impact on workers than the much-hyped advent of robots and artificial intelligence. A permanent, full-time, paid job with accompanying benefits (like job security, paid time off, and pension and health programs) is no longer normal practice in most countries to choose what technologies are implemented, to what ends, and who bears the resulting costs and benefits. Perhaps we should be less concerned with technology, and more with the unbalanced decision-making structure within which technology is presently governed.

The barrier to better treatment is not technology, but the imbalance of power in modern economies.

Robots or no robots, work is here to stay

There are enduring features of paid work that ensure it will remain the cornerstone of the economy, and the major pillar of financial well-being for most households. The question is not whether or not work will somehow ‘disappear’: it can’t. The question is how society will choose to treat, protect, and compensate the work that will remain essential to its economic and social progress.

In the realm of digital platforms and ‘gigs’, for example, paid work is still very clearly the driving force of production and growth. Modern digital businesses rely on paid workers to produce their ultimate output. But those firms have developed clever systems to minimise or evade the risks, costs and obligations traditionally faced by employers (minimum wages, notice of dismissal, pension and health benefits, etc.). Contrary to the popular assumption that digital platforms are the ‘cutting edge’ of business innovation, their work practices are centuries old: including piece-work compensation, on-demand work scheduling, and labour hire systems that have been around as long as capitalism. In previous decades, limits were imposed on some of these work practices: through ambitious labour regulations, full-employment macroeconomic policies, and collective bargaining. The more recent resurgence of insecure work has not been driven by technology, but by the deliberate relaxation of those former constraints on employers. We can easily imagine better ways of compensating and protecting gig workers: starting by applying traditional protections (minimum wage, pension entitlements), just as in other paid positions. The barrier to better treatment is not technology, but the imbalance of power in modern economies.

These twin disruptions – changing technology and changing working relationships – have led some observers to conclude that work, broadly defined, can no longer be the financial and social foundation of households and society. People will need to find other ways to support themselves, and/or fall back on income supports delivered by the state (perhaps through a guaranteed annual income). This vision of a workless future can be described positively (as a world in which humans have ample leisure time to pursue a range of interests) or negatively (as a dystopia in which wealth becomes concentrated amongst a narrow property-owning elite, while most people huddle at the margins seeking a way to survive). Both scenarios assume that paid work is diminishing in importance.

This assumption is misplaced.

JIM STANFORD
is Economist and Director of the Centre for Future Work in Sydney, Australia. He worked previously as economist for Canadian union Unifor, and is the author of Economics for Everyone (London: Pluto, 2015).
The advent of new forms of robotics, artificial intelligence, and other innovations will never eliminate work in a general sense. They could substantially increase the productivity (and quality) of output. But robots and computers do not fall from the sky: they are produced by human labour, and continue to require inputs of labour at all stages (including design, engineering, manufacture, operation, and maintenance). Automation always involves replacing direct labour (at the final stage of production) with indirect labour (producing various inputs and intermediate goods used in production, including machinery). But even in highly automated processes, human labour is essential to all production.

If productivity surges thanks to new technology (and there is no evidence that this is occurring), then society will face important choices about how to capture and distribute the resulting gains. Higher productivity can support higher real incomes and hence higher material consumption; alternatively, it can facilitate less work. (Labour movements have traditionally demanded a bit of both: higher real incomes and less working time.) Of course, ‘less work’ can have positive or negative effects: attained through equitable reductions in normal working hours for all workers, or through concentrated (and painful) reductions in work time for particular groups of workers (namely, unemployed or underemployed workers). Once again, the outcome is not pre-ordained or technologically-driven. It depends on the choices we make as a society.

So far, however, that discussion is mostly hypothetical: despite all the hype, there is no evidence that workers are generally being replaced by a new wave of computers, robots, and intelligent machines. To the contrary, capital investment in the business sector has been very weak in most developed economies since the global financial crisis. In fact, the average capital-labour ratio in several advanced economies (including the US, the UK, Japan, and even Germany) has been declining since 2010 – indicating that the average worker uses less equipment and technology in their work, not more. This is partly because hyper-competitive labour markets still find new ways to employ low-cost labour in menial, degrading, and poorly-paid positions – despite the productive potential of technology. Consider, for example, the large numbers of new jobs in low-productivity private services like retail, hospitality, and personal services. Curiously, it seems that investment in new technology is too weak (not too strong). This opens the door to a deeper critique of modern economic management: instead of worrying that technology will take our jobs, we should demand more control of the investment process, aiming to elicit more investment, and the power to direct that investment for better economic, social and environmental outcomes.

**Determining the future of work**

The benefits of technological change for workers could be enhanced, and negative effects reduced, through sensible, pragmatic measures – implemented at various levels of the labour market. Some obvious opportunities include:

- **Strong rights to information, notice, and input,** so that workers are aware of technological changes planned for their workplaces, and can prepare well in advance.
- **Rights to negotiate adjustment measures,** protections, and work practices relevant to new technologies as part of normal dialogue with employers.
- **Limits on the use of electronic systems of employee surveillance, monitoring,** and discipline.
- **Strong commitment from employers to ‘internal mobility’,** including redeployment of workers affected by technological change.
- **Strong public support for ‘external mobility’,** for affected workers who cannot find alternative positions within their current workplaces. This should include strong income protections, training, and relocation assistance.
- **Larger and more effective investments by both governments and employers in lifelong learning, skills development, and vocational pathways for new and re-entering workers.**
- **It is much easier for workers to adjust to technological change when alternative job opportunities are amply available, and hence a commitment to full-employment macroeconomic policy by governments is critical.**
- **Work in human and caring services will account for more jobs in the future, due to growing demand and because these jobs are less amenable to automation. Governments should make the most of this trend by investing in expanded these services.**

There is no doubt that work has a future. The economy cannot function without productive human labour: it is the only force capable of adding value to the resources we harvest (hopefully sustainably) from nature. Every society must decide how work will be organised, how workers will be treated and compensated, how innovation will be directed and new technologies implemented. None of those decisions are pre-ordained; the false sense of ‘technological determinism’ infecting many debates about the future of work must be energetically rejected. Decisions which are made ultimately reflect who gets to make them: will the future of work be determined solely by the interests of private investors and employers, or through a more participatory and democratic process?

A positive future for work is certainly possible, but only if we elevate the goal of decent, secure work to the top of the policy agenda – and empower workers to play a full role in the resulting social decisions.