

The Technologically Challenging Future of Work

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In 2017, the majority of lower middle class and middle class American citizens are still waiting for their stagnant economic position since the latter 1970's to abate. When this long term economic condition is combined with the more recent losses for the middle class from the Great Recession and the escalating economic inequality that this middle class has witnessed in the period of Recovery, the current frustration and anger of the middle class is understandable. And this overall economic situation applies to the middle class in most of the developed world! The question is: Is it reasonable to expect a change in this situation for the worldwide middle class, and especially a change that results in the employment notion that underlies the "Make America Great Again" claim? Is there more to our current and future challenge than just getting back to the same old "family wage" jobs picture which traditionally has depended on an expanding economy supported by an increasing population and underwritten by a ballooning national debt, which is partially offset over time by inflation?

Currently we think of "work" in terms of the employed and the unemployed with the unemployed expected to look for and eventually find work even in a recession. How does this division and expectation stack up against the major forces beginning to define work and the economy? Not very well!!

Two allied forces are present. First, human population continues to climb worldwide with only developed countries really having significantly slowed the pace. From over seven billion, the expectation is that we will be at least nine billion people by the end of this century. That is a 23% increase in just ninety years, with these folks joining the rest in clambering for a standard of living equal to that of the developed countries. This combination of increased population and standard of living will put a lot of pressure on limited natural resources and on a climate already significantly challenged by the effects of our consumption. Second, technology has vastly improved the efficiency of labor resulting in half as many jobs being necessary to supply twice as many goods. The combination of these two forces at work results in a future where more people seek fewer and fewer jobs while expecting employment and a universally high standard of living.

Let's take a look at the technology part of this economic picture. Efficiency/productivity in both the manufacturing and service industries is led by

technological advancement and particularly the contribution of computers. In merely two hundred years, agrarian world cultures have morphed into manufacturing societies, which have morphed into service economies, all of which are headed for what have been called “leisure” societies. It started with the consolidation of farms as cheap energy became available to fuel more and larger motorized machinery and then computerized equipment. These developments together with improved transportation eliminated three quarters of the jobs in both farming and the small towns of an agrarian based society. With the agriculturally displaced moving to cities in search of work, manufacturing jobs provided the answer for a time. Presently, computerized machinery, including 3-D printing and robotics, is eliminating much of this work, leaving only a few high paid programmers to run whole industrial floors of robots and 3-D printers. Currently, the explosion of computer based artificial intelligence is magnifying these and many other comparable developments in the general world of employment.

For a time professional level jobs seemed to be mostly safe from these impacts, but in recent years computers and sophisticated software have replaced the need for many low to middle level service jobs. In this regard, many basic financial and legal and engineering jobs are now performed entirely by computers or are outsourced daily to countries where skilled computer workers perform the tasks at reduced cost with results available for the following business day’s opening.

While for most of the 19th and 20th centuries the jobs lost to technological innovations were offset by jobs created, in the 21st century, and especially since the Great Recession, more and more economists are recognizing a threshold as having been crossed with a clear trend toward overall increased job losses worldwide. If this trend continues and even picks up momentum – as many experts predict, the nations of the world will face a double whammy of many more people due to increased population at the same time there are many fewer jobs. It could even evolve to the point where the “unemployed” become the majority. Such a major potential shift in the condition of employment, first in the developed countries and then worldwide, will require some serious adjustments in our thinking and major changes in our institutions.

How do we address a permanent condition where by traditional standards more and more able people – even the majority are “unemployed”? Clearly we cannot afford to provide “unemployment benefits” to the majority on a permanent basis! And we cannot subsidize a do-nothing populous. So, what is the answer? What follows is a description of two options.

Option One We can continually reduce the hours in the workday and work week – four hour days, four day work weeks so less work can be shared across an increasing and increasingly efficient and productive work force. This will leave the labor force with a lot of “spare” or leisure time, an opportunity for the pursuit of recreation and avocation. Recreation can provide jobs for others, and avocations, if pursued vigorously, can have productive consequences. But as the work domain continues to shrink, there is the real challenge that without a lot of direction, idle hands are prone to getting into trouble – just look at the foolish and counter-productive behavior of the idle rich and the idle poor? It will take a lot of social management/direction of free time to make this approach work. And what does a career look like in this context when some of the most important occupations require full-time commitment and involvement to acquire the skills to execute them and to do the work necessary to offer results that can contribute to progress? Does a doctor or lawyer or engineer labor intensely for years to be credentialed in a specialty only to spend three hours a day practicing his or her trade? Or does this approach lead to a two layered job classed society – full time professionals and part time “laborers” – the basis for a new version of a class based society.

Option Two: Consider an alternative solution. Maybe we have to redefine the concept of work where work can include activities outside of the commercial and governmental realms. We may need to identify legitimate work in the non-commercial domain of activities where we recognize work as benefiting the community or the common good. The jobs that are now in non-profit and philanthropic, community benefit areas could become an expanding domain of work in the future. What is now primarily the realm of volunteerism could become a new workplace. Presently, these “non-profits” and their often philanthropic supporters provide valuable and needed development activities and social services. These organizations could be expanded and incorporated into the mainstream economy with appropriate levels of reward offered to those holding jobs in them.

How do we pay for this new domain of work that currently comes at little or no apparent cost? There is simply no way to avoid committing to the concept of a minimum national income for those willing to work, and only to those willing to work. In such a system, there can be virtually no subsidized unemployed. Instead, if a job is lost in the commercial or governmental sector and the individual cannot locate a replacement job within a very short period of time, a job must be identified in the community benefit sector for that person, a job that as best as possible matches that worker’s interests, talents and capabilities. There can be no six months or year or two years on unemployment benefits.

So, first the guaranteed national income for all who work is paid for in the efficiency of eliminating the great majority of the cost of unemployment benefits. All able to work will have a job and be paid for their labor. If a person is able and does not work, no benefits will come to him or her - period. In addition, work in the community benefit sector must be found that is suitable for the partially or fully disabled. All must contribute to society in some meaningful way to the best of their ability. An individual must be almost comatose to get by with doing nothing. No free rides. No idle teenagers. No "permanent," full time disability on Social Security. All citizens either seriously advance their education to improve their talents/skills or they serve in the employment system from a young age, as was the case in earlier periods of human societies when young people as well as the elderly had substantial chores and responsibilities.

In this "full employment" system there is no retirement for older citizens. Seniors may work less and contribute in ways different from what they did in their dynamic younger years, but they have to continue to contribute to the level of their ability. Older citizens can take pride in their continued meaningful involvement, not in their ability to position themselves in a separate, do-nothing, retired state for what may be a quarter of their lives! With all contributing to the system and virtually no retirement and no free rides, the economic and social efficiency of the system increases enormously, which helps to greatly offset costs.

With universal lifetime "employment," the need for charity virtually disappears, and in the present system charitable foundations constitute a huge category of "expenditure." So, there are significant savings here to help offset the costs of supporting a minimum national income.

And yes, there must be a fair system to redistribute wealth to help pay for what amounts to universal employment from the young person to the infirm elder. No outrageous windfalls and inheritance and hidden benefits for a few who have fortuitous access to the wealth pot. But fair does not mean that those who excel and achieve at a high level are not rewarded with a reasonably improved economic standard of living. But it can also be the case that the more a person contributes to the communal pot for redistribution, the greater should be their recognition and prestige, not the opposite as now pertains. Instead of hiding, hoarding, or flaunting excessive personal wealth, individuals can be celebrated for returning wealth to support the benefit of the whole community. Registries can exist from the local to the international levels that salute those who give the greatest proportion of their wealth to support the common good. Gone would be the days of admiring vacuous celebrities and the super rich for their decadent lifestyles.

For Option Two to work, the current conservative anti-tax attitude, which supports excessive individual wealth accumulation, would have to be reversed. Those who hoard wealth for their exclusive benefit would become pariahs, and these hoarders would earn a place on a registry of the socially notorious and suffer embarrassment and shunning.

In response to Option Two, there are likely to be cries of “communism” from some regions of American society. But on closer examination, Option Two is neither merely liberal nor simply conservative. Instead, it satisfies both points of view. Conservatives should be delighted by the retained private ownership of property, the absolute work requirement – no free rides, the elimination of the economic welfare system, the greater efficiency of the system, the freedom of occupational choice for the individual, and the differential reward for higher valued contributions. Liberals should celebrate the economic inclusiveness of a guaranteed national income, the restraint on individual economic excess, the emphasis on communal values and responsibility, and the incorporation of the non-profit community benefit and philanthropic sectors into the core of the economic system.

Under Option Two, there is no hint of communal ownership of property or dictatorial powers to force individuals to do anything other than to contribute their fair share to the workforce in exchange for accessing a guaranteed minimum living wage. Citizens are free to pursue their interests and to find their place in this scheme. And individual citizens can acquire wealth through their talents and live at an “improved” standard of living, just not an exorbitant standard. Instead of being celebrated for their accumulated wealth, occupational achievers are honored for the level of contribution that they make to the common good.

I have explored two options for addressing the coming occupational challenge of a technologically impacted world economy. Modifications to the first option might make it viable, while the second option requires a major remake of the existing socio-economic system and the values associated with it. The latter is a tall order, but ultimately the second option is more inclusive, “complete,” and probably sustainable. What do you think? What option can you offer to address the changing world of work?