

Editor's introduction to special issue on the future of work and the twenty-first century workplace

In recent times, there has been an explosion of interest in the potential impacts of the internet and advanced digital technologies, such as AI, robotics and big data on the future of work and jobs.

Predictions have ranged from dystopian visions of technological unemployment to more optimistic scenarios in which technology is used to “informate” and augment rather than merely automate and displace human workers. While acknowledging the value of predicting technological impacts on jobs, this Special Issue focuses on a broader range of potential impacts on workers and the workplace.

Contributions from authors in Canada, the USA, Australia, Europe and the UK provide a diverse set of perspectives, both local and global, covering a range of economic, social and environmental issues.

Geraint Johnes describes an empirical research study conducted into the regional distribution and characteristics of the gig economy in the UK. The author notes that while the term gig work is typically used to describe work of short duration, often part time and frequently obtained via the Internet it lacks a clear definition and that for the purpose of his research gig workers were defined as self-employed respondents in a limited range of standard occupational classifications covering construction, transport and delivery and creative and professional services. Given that gig work takes many forms, involving both virtual and physical activities requiring different skill sets, its patterns of regional distribution may be expected to vary. Little research appears to have been conducted into this “spatial” aspect however; hence, the motivation for the author’s study. According to his research the gig economy appears to have developed largely in the aftermath to the global financial crisis (GFC) and to be “very much a London phenomenon,” mainly due to the capital’s high levels of media and IT workers compared to other parts of the UK. Gig work is shown to have grown only very slowly elsewhere in the UK. Looking ahead the author predicts the percentage of gig workers reaching a steady state of around 6.5 per cent in London and 3.5 to 5.5 per cent in other regions, with a higher percentage in the south versus the north. He concludes that in addition to addressing the challenges typically caused by gig work, policymakers and other stakeholders should pay attention to the differential impacts of the gig economy on workers with differing skill sets and resident in different regional labour markets.

Wendy Cukier commences her article on disruptive processes and skills mismatches in Canada with a review of the literature covering the impacts of technology on labour markets and changing skill demands. She highlights what she describes as tendencies in the literature to overemphasize “scary” and deterministic predictions of job losses through future automation, despite historical evidence of both job destruction and creation flowing from previous technological change. Similarly, she identifies a tendency to frame skill gaps and mismatches as due to a lack of digital or STEM- related skills, despite little labour market evidence in Canada of a current skills shortage in these areas.

Cukier argues for a more nuanced examination of technological impacts and for strategies to address skills gaps and mismatches based on social innovation and inclusion rather than applying what she describes as “strong-arm” tactics to try to force educational institutions to produce less graduates for markets likely to be automated and more



graduates for markets predicted to demand skilled human capital. She recommends instead the adoption of cross-sectoral collaborations between educators and employers, involving work integrated learning and internship programs, and she cites several examples of promising initiatives currently underway. Noting that despite Canada's aggressive immigration strategy, having a foreign sounding name still makes it far less likely that applicants will receive a job interview, she proposes more socially inclusive strategies, such as blind resumes and the use of better metrics by talent matching platforms. Cukier concludes by acknowledging that her recommendations are not aimed at countering the deeper socio-political forces that have led to the deterministic predictions of technological progress and other issues she describes and noting that these bigger issues remain to be addressed.

Korok Ray and Tessa Thomas combine a review of the economics literature with a small-scale case study in their exploration of the effects of the Internet and associated technologies on global labour markets and employment. They describe three key economic and technological trends: digital technologies reducing firm transaction costs and enabling outsourcing of transactions to the market; availability of low cost internet access enabling people in poorer countries to offer their labour globally online; and a shift to performance based pay supported by low-cost technologies capable of monitoring the outputs of online workers. Arguing against criticisms of online [labour] outsourcing as promoting "digital sweatshops" the authors describe the case of a nurse living in the Philippines who, having been forced to cut back her hospital working hours, successfully used an online labour hire platform over a prolonged period to supplement her income. Turning to the role of the state they predict that current debates about immigration will likely change as work shifts online, possibly leading to the imposition of online labour tariffs by governments concerned to protect their populations against global competition. Governments, the authors suggest, should instead take a neutral stance or promote relevant upskilling by industry. In their conclusion the authors reject concerns regarding technological unemployment and point to the history of technology and people serving as complements. As a future research agenda they advocate examining the US labour market to identify weaknesses and determine training needs and the establishment of more rigorous standards for checking online labourer's qualifications and experience.

Kevin You presents findings from a case study into the contributions of Sri Lankan business interests to dealing with the largely technologically induced brain drain from that country. He describes how, in common with other developing countries, Sri Lanka's economic and social development has been negatively impacted by skilled workers moving to more advanced economies. Reviewing the literature on human capital flight the author notes its emphasis on state-led interventions to address the problem, such as requiring emigrants to pay back part of their state funded education or offering incentives for repatriation. He describes how the lack of prior research into the role of non-state actors prompted the development of a case study into the role of Sri Lankan peak business interest associations in tackling the brain drain- an issue critical to its members' survival. Data for the case study were obtained from publicly available sources plus interviews with Sri Lanka's five peak business associations. Findings from the study revealed a range of contributions from the associations aimed at reducing the "push factors" positively influencing human capital flight. Contributions included promoting ethnic and religious harmony; lobbying for government policies likely to create domestic opportunities for skilled workers; working with other actors to safeguard faith in the political systems; and engaging in initiatives to improve workforce training and development. The author suggests that the makeup and motivations of Sri Lanka's peak bodies would not be unlike

similar associations in other countries and thus the findings of the case study including strategies adopted by the Sri Lankan business associations may well be applicable elsewhere.

Marko Orel discusses the need among self-employed workers for physical co-working spaces to combat isolation, share resources and collaborate with other self-employed individuals.

Commenting on the rapid growth of such environments in recent years he describes how they tend to exemplify values of collaboration, community, informality and social responsibility that extend beyond the individual workers to the local community. Orel notes that such values align with those of conscious businesses, a concept derived from the notion of conscious capitalism, which he defines as businesses that value and seek to balance the interests of the environment, society, customers, suppliers, employees and investors. The author next presents results from an ongoing ethnographic research project, involving five independently operating and self-financed co-working spaces in four EU countries, designed to investigate the characteristics of co-working spaces and explore their links with conscious business. All five workspaces were found to have adopted similar values of learning, collaboration and diversity and in four of the five cases individuals had associated their workplaces with a lifestyle aimed at change and social inclusion. The co working spaces were observed to involve resource sharing and to be striving towards collectively set goals involving the workers and their local communities in a manner consistent with the concept of conscious business. The author notes that while the study findings indicate links between conscious business and co-working a wider sample would be needed to investigate these connections and to identify the impacts of new and evolving co-working spaces on stakeholders.

Alan Cottey proposes a global reappraisal of what work is and its redefinition as useful, disciplined activity. He attributes current uncertainty regarding the future of work to two main factors: disruptive techniques (including advanced technologies) and global ecological overload. With regard to the second factor he argues that political and economic policies aimed at rapid economic growth combined with weak market regulation are creating a situation in which overpopulation, loss of species' habitat, climate change and strife become more likely. Using machines to replace work done by people, according to Cottey, is unlikely to change this negative trend, since the pursuit of economic growth will not necessarily be reduced by their introduction. To avoid such a catastrophe he proposes the global adoption of two basic principles: Liveable Global Habitat and Necessities of Right, the former depending in part on a policy of "degrowth" and the latter involving an amplified form of universal basic income. In such a scenario work would be redefined as useful, disciplined activity that contributed to the above principles and related goals. Future work practices, management and leadership would need to be aligned with these values and policies. The author concludes by acknowledging that there is no known way to achieve the scenario he describes but that empathic dialogue between "economic traditionalists" and those advocating major change on behalf of the ecology would be a step in the right direction.

The range of papers contained in this Special Issue on the future of work and the twenty-first century workplace represent a small sample of viewpoints, each paper offering a distinctly different perspective. As well as providing fresh insights they suggest many potential avenues for future exploration which may prove useful to those interested in researching this fascinating and important topic.

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