

The Future of Work (Part 1)  
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One of the thorniest problems facing all the world's modern governments is providing work for all able-bodied adults. Work is the process of providing all the needs of a society and paying those performing the work enough to support their families, their communities, and their government (through taxes).

In flourishing societies, most people who want to work can find it. When societies are in trouble, gainful employment shrinks, leaving many people potentially homeless and hungry. Governments rise and fall as the consequence of the abundance or dearth of paid labor. A deep dive into the history of human labor puts this process into perspective.

Our most ancient human beings were not very different from their animal ancestors. Work was the process of finding food and water. They survived by migrating to where food was available, and often fought with others when food was scarce.

The first change in work came with the taming of fire. Fire made possible cooking meats and grains, keeping more humans alive than possible before. Fire also made possible the creation of weapons: sharpened wooden stakes, and smelting metals. This work gave us benefits over more dangerous animals, including hunting and then preserving meats.

Ice ages came and went, and human beings learned how to survive them by living as clans, weaving fibers, sewing furs, finding herbs and plants that were medicinal, adding to our longevity.

About 10,000 years ago, human work as we know it today began to emerge. Humans discovered that wild grains could be cultivated, game animals trapped and raised for their milk, pelts, and meat. Others discovered that they could make boats that could make catching fish enough scale to provide a product (salted or dried) that could be traded for farmed foods and fire-manufactured tools.

Our hunter-gatherer ancestors were pretty much equal, in that each clan member was necessary to survival of the group. The only claim to superiority were leaders, chiefs, who could always be challenged by rivals over time.

The agricultural revolution changed all of this. Settled villages needed protection, which gave status to protectors (chiefs and armed followers). The mystery of good harvests, bad harvests, hunger, and newly arriving diseases provided work for religious practitioners who could satisfy the fear of the gods through their intervention. Religion was born.

The fruits of human labor were no longer equally shared. Women became property. Enslaving rival tribes provided childbearing wives, field labor, and domestic labor. As villages grew into towns, cities, and nations, work became more complex and unequal, and class systems emerged. Those with status living in cities were supported by others, giving them time to think, to experiment with systems of rule, and to travel and widen their experience (ancient Greece).

The invention of the printing press changed human society into what we know today. Knowledge exploded, literacy grew, the old social order was challenged, and the modern world as we know it was born.

The industrial revolution provided work, heavy work at first for the lowest class. But eventually the system provided enough benefits for the majority of the populations in literate countries enjoyed middle class lives: ample food, shelter, medicine, entertainment, and travel. Middle class children joined the upper class in universities, serving in all the elements of work needed in a modern society and inventing new methods of reducing human labor.

Looking back over the history of human work, we started with daylong searches for food, then the laborious work of farming, mining, construction, soldiers and sailors, and all the burdens of women as child-bearers, weavers, spinners, cooks, sex slaves, and healers.

Religion (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) gave us the 6-day week, with one day labor free. For centuries, the labor had no limit of time work was demanded. By 1900, the average work week in industry was 48 hours a week. Servants worked longer hours. Then the 40-hour workweek was mandated, and society found that more work was done in 40 than in 48 hours.

Today, Artificial Intelligence (robotics) is already replacing much human labor. What kind of world can exist with little human labor? How will people survive without payed work?

Next week: the future of work.

687 words.

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