

THEME 02

# Could we live without a job?

POST-WORK

AUTOMATION

AI

Automation has the potential to completely change the way we conceive of work, and writers like Aaron Bastani already speak of a post-work society. To envision what this change would mean for us, we need to first understand what role work played and plays in our Western society.

## Our observations

- We've often written about the [potential of AI](#) and robots and how they might outperform human workers. Besides the benefits that certainly come with these technologies (easier data analysis, less heavy manual work, increasing productivity), policy analysts fear they will displace a relevant number of workers. In addition, recent interactions between AI and [cognitive computing](#) suggest that automation will not only influence the more traditional targets (retail and transport sectors) but might also substitute human workers in more complex and creative jobs.
- There is a growing body of literature on the idea of a post-work or minimum-work society brought about by massive automation. Even though [data](#) does not suggest that we will soon experience a radical replacement of working humans by machines, considering this extreme scenario might be useful to start questioning the value we attach to our working life.
- The interest in the changing nature of the relationship between humans and their jobs stems from art and literature as well. The Art collective [Lou Cantor](#) has opened an exhibition on the post-automation future and its implications for psychology, sociality and work replacement. Moreover, 20th century novelist JG Ballard explored the psychological effects of a life without jobs in *Having a Wonderful Time* (1978). While some of the characters in his novel embrace their free time to undertake (subjectively) meaningful activities, others do not seem to be able to find meaning in their lives beyond work.



## Connecting the dots

We live in an extremely work-centered society. Jobs are not only the means with which we meet our most basic material needs; they are a way to establish status and identity. We spend more than one third of our life working and this is what we prepare for during most of our schooling years. When we are kids, we are asked: What do you want to be when you grow up? And often (if not always), the question and the answer refer to the job we believe we will do in the future. When we decide where and what to study, we look at employability rates to understand what university will guarantee a profitable and satisfying career for us. “Career days” and recruitment events at universities are becoming more and more common and a sign of prestige for the organizing institutes. So even our infancy and education system are entrenched with the work-centered lifestyle of our society. In addition, there seems to be a negative stereotype towards those who did not manage to have a big career: the hedonists, the lazy and demotivated. But, has this always been the case? Historically speaking, the positive normative value we attach to work is a relatively recent development in our Western society. In ancient history, the Hebrews and the Greeks believed that work (ponos, later used in Latin as poena, i.e. sorrow) was a curse inflicted on humans by divinities. In fact, manual labor was imposed on slaves while higher social classes dedicated their time to art, warfare, philosophy and big commerce. Especially for the Greeks, wisdom and prestige were determined by the amount and quality of leisure time one could enjoy, not by one’s career achievements. With the advent of Protestantism in the 16th century, the cultural perception of physical work changed. In the Protestant ethic, hard work had a major role in giving meaning to one’s life. Indeed, Protestantism offered a religious rationale to support work as a value for everyone, independently of social classes. Later on, the philosophy of hard work spread beyond religious justifications and

became part of the secularized culture of Western societies. In the late 18th century, work was not only the basic means to survival, it became an ideal citizens could strive for if they wanted a better life, a means to freedom from oppression. In fact, central figures of the American Revolution such as Benjamin Franklin praised the liberating value of work in their writings. The industrialization of the 19th century and its continuation in the 20th century changed work ethics again. Middle and lower classes started to lose control over their jobs. Whereas before, most of the businesses had been family and home-based, technological developments radically changed the work environment: small businesses evolved into huge industrial factories owned by capital owners. In this new setting, both psychological and economic rewards for hard work were not assured anymore. The mechanization and anonymity of tasks reduced workers to appendages of machines who were not able to enjoy the benefits of their hard work due to low salaries and prolonged working hours. While some scholars worried about the disruptive effects of an obsession with work due to industrialization, Keynes was more optimistic and predicted that new technologies would reduce working hours to 15 per week and that we would be able to enjoy our free time in prosperity, assigning more value to culture, knowledge and sociality. However, the economist was not right. We still live in a work-centered society where the wealthy can strive for more intellectual careers and the poor are dependent on multiple precarious jobs to survive. The digital revolution we are experiencing has already changed our relationship to work and might change it further. One’s expectations may, nevertheless, differ. Those who fear the advent of automation and digital technologies highlight that they might increase unemployment, especially for those already struggling. The enthusiasts on the other side contend that we will finally see Keynes’ promises fulfilled: reduced working hours and more leisure time for other meaningful activities.

## Implications

- If we want automation to have a positive impact on our relationship to work, we need to ensure that the gains from enhanced productivity will be shared so that everyone can work less and still have the means to survive. The most common, yet controversial, proposal is to introduce a universal basic income or substantial benefit schemes in our welfare systems. The trends of “extended youth” and postponed “adult travel behavior” are structural, but so far,
- A society with no (or little) work might be a challenge not only from an economic perspective, but from a psychological one too. Since work has come to have meaning in itself and we now associate it with self-worth, it might not be easy to adapt to a life without work. For example, according to anthropologist David Graeber, our obsession with work, i.e. “workism”, led us to create “bullshit” jobs that in turn have dragged us into depression and a burnout epidemic. Thus, the transition to a post-work society should be sensitive to our psychological need for self-worth.
- Considering that jobs have come to define one’s identity, people might experience an existential crisis if there isn’t as much work to be done, or they might simply not be able to spend their free time in a satisfying way. Indeed, we might need to think about ensuring the possibility to engage in other meaningful projects beyond jobs, such as volunteering, sports, art, social activities and cultural circles. Indeed, this is one of the promises of post-work enthusiasts.