

The Future of Work

A Background Paper for the Oxford Diocesan Synod debate

At our last Diocesan Synod in November, I offered a presidential address on the theme of the future of work and the Fourth Industrial Revolution. You can find the address here if you would like to revisit it: <https://blogs.oxford.anglican.org/responding-to-the-fourth-industrial-revolution/>

I gave notice in November that I would be bringing a motion back to the Diocesan Synod for debate in March with a view to the motion going forward for debate at the General Synod in due course. We will therefore be debating the following motion when we meet on 20th March.

That this Synod:

'mindful of the deep economic effects of the pandemic, the impacts of new technology, and the global rise of new forms of working--

(a) affirm the dignity and value of purposeful work as a significant component of human flourishing

(b) endorse and commend the five principles used for evaluating fair and dignified platform work in the gig economy by Fair.work and

(c) calls for the Faith and Order Commission (FAOC) together with Mission and Public Affairs Committee to advise on what is essential to purposeful, dignified, and fair work in the context of the fourth industrial revolution now in progress.'

I will introduce the motion briefly. I hope the debate will give the opportunity for members of Synod to speak from their own reflection and experience on the future of work in our society and that we can resource one another.

I am grateful to Dr. Simon Cross, my research and parliamentary assistant, for this introductory paper which sets the scene for the debate.

The Rt Revd Dr Steven Croft
Bishop of Oxford

Why this issue?

Work is being dramatically transformed in both nature and degree by the three greatest challenges of our time. First, the Covid-19 global pandemic. Secondly, the advent of technologies that characterise a fourth industrial revolution. Thirdly, by the resource driven crises of the planet's climate and ecological emergencies.

The pandemic has disclosed an awkward and painful difference between work that can be suspended through furlough, done remotely from home, or done only in person. Many in person jobs are now recognised as 'essential' to society's smooth running and yet comprise low status, low wages and offer little job security. As the most severe economic effects of the pandemic wane and the government's furlough scheme is unwound jobs will continue to change or disappear by the millions, most harming those at the beginning¹ and the latter end² of their working lives.

As we look beyond the pandemic, technology is fundamentally transforming work in as yet uncertain ways. This new digital and data driven working landscape is not merely a single technological invention but something more akin to a general purpose technology. Against this backdrop new jobs must now navigate a distinction between 'employee' and the more precarious role of 'contractor'. Present day work must also reckon with the weakening of collective bargaining, the rise of the gig economy, and the historical dilution of the nation's social safety net.³

Yet even such powerful forces as a global pandemic and a technological revolution are dwarfed by the biggest threat of all: the combined climate and ecological crises. The world faces a bleak future unless we can rapidly shift away, not only from fossil fuels but also from consumerism-driven jobs that collectively outstrip the planet's natural, annual, productive resources.

The future of work is, then, one of the most pressing questions of these times.

The amount of work is changing

The Covid-19 pandemic has wrought the UK's deepest recession in some 300 years.⁴ Furlough has prevented the worst-case projections of 12% unemployed, but the November unemployment rate rose to 5% and, year on year, over 800,000 jobs were lost by February 2021.⁵ The lack of new job

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/oct/26/covid-job-losses-hitting-young-people-hardest-in-uk-study-finds>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/feb/04/lost-generation-unemployed-pandemic-hits-careers-of-over-50s>

³ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2020/05/01/coalition-call/>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/feb/03/the-uks-covid-19-unemployment-crisis-in-six-charts>

⁵ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/uklabourmarket/january2021#main-points>

creation in the midst of lockdown is leading to a vast oversupply of job seekers, with stories emerging of thousands applying for a single service sector job.⁶

In the longer run, history shows that industrial revolutions have tended to make nations wealthier by creating novel new forms of work and augmenting many existing roles, even while replacing others. More Than 60% of Jobs Done in 2018 had not yet been “invented” in 1940.⁷ But, in the short run, this upheaval also makes individuals poorer and, for some, that short run can last a lifetime. Furthermore, this fourth IR may be the first to eliminate more well-paid jobs than it creates. In 1990 the top three US car-makers had a market capitalisation of \$36 billion and employed 1.2 million people. Last year, Silicon Valley’s top three companies had a market value of more than \$4.5 trillion, but only 341,000 employees between them.⁸

Even before the pandemic, Robot Process Automation (RPA) was forecast to replace up to 500,000 retail jobs by 2025,⁹ but COVID-19 has markedly accelerated the transition from high street to digital/warehouse.¹⁰ Ocado, for example, is rapidly increasing use of robotics in its warehousing.¹¹

Now underemployment – especially amongst those on zero hours contracts - is becoming a significant feature of the working landscape. In spring 2020 the number of people on zero hours contracts in the UK rose to over a million, up 80% since 2013. An estimated 1 in 10 workers in Britain now also work on short-term or freelance contracts in the ‘gig economy’. Some workers enjoy the flexibility of such contracts, but many accept zero hours, agency, or self-employed contracts only because they cannot find a more secure option. The Living Wage Foundation calculates that 40% of workers experiencing income insecurity are parents, contradicting the image of agency or gig work as a lifestyle choice by independent young adults and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation says underemployment as a cause of rising levels of in-work poverty.¹² In his 2020 book *A World Without Work*, Oxford professor Daniel Susskind says

It is hard to escape the conclusion that we are heading towards a world with less work for people to do. The threat of technological unemployment is real. More troubling still, the traditional response of “more education” is likely to be less and less effective as time rolls on.

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/jul/22/receptionist-job-manchester-applications-24-hours-uk-hospitality-sector-rising-unemployment>

⁷ <https://workofthefuture.mit.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2020-Final-Report4.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.macrotrends.net>

⁹ <https://www.chargedretail.co.uk/2019/10/24/500000-uk-retail-jobs-to-be-replaced-by-robots-by-2024/>

¹⁰ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/02/climbing-robots-automation-jobs-warehouses/>

¹¹ <https://www.dezeen.com/2018/06/06/video-ocado-warehouse-shopping-robots-movie/>

¹² <https://www.progressive-policy.net/publications/from-precarious-to-prosperous>

The type and quality of work are changing

In the UK, manufacturing accounted for about 25% of GDP during the inter-war years but less than 10% between 2000 and 2016. In 2017, the global *service* sector accounted for 70 per cent of total gross world product.

A new knowledge-based form of globalisation is still accelerating, with online tasks going wherever the labour is cheapest but without the tell-tale signs of physical migration to show for it. This heralds a further global levelling down of wages and conditions for millions working in the 'knowledge economy' of Western countries as they compete with workers from developing nations.

An increasing number of jobs are based on humans working, in effect, for algorithms dispensed via computers rather than directly for other people and for what is, in effect, piece work: payment per task completed. Such work can be monotonous, repetitive or, in the case of content moderation, downright harrowing.¹³ Even among employees in more conventional roles there is a sense that many contemporary jobs lack meaning or purpose; "bullshit jobs" as a now famous 2014 article put it.¹⁴

The benefits of work are changing

Precarious and lacking the associated benefits of the 'standard employment contract' available to previous generations, many new jobs are intentionally arranged in ways that are both poorly paid and designed to be isolating.

In 1975, 8% of UK workers were self-employed; by 2019, this had increased to more than 14%. This rise has been driven entirely by 'solo self-employment', i.e., contractors ranging from delivery drivers to airline pilots. The solo self-employed earn around 30% less than employees on average and the gap has widened over time. In 2018, over half of these solo self-employed earned less than £300 a week, compared with just a third of employees.¹⁵

Last November Californian voters passed Prop 22, allowing workers at gig companies to continue to be classified as contractors thereby denying them access to employee rights such as minimum wage, unemployment benefits, health insurance and collective bargaining. Uber and Lyft spent over \$200 million on the campaign. In the UK, however, drivers have just won a battle, taken all the way to the

¹³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-52642633>

¹⁴ <https://www.strike.coop/bullshit-jobs/>

¹⁵ <https://ifs.org.uk/uploads/BN-What-does-the-rise-of-self-employment-tell-us-about-the-UK-labour-market-1.pdf>

supreme court by Uber, and so will now be classified as employees entitling them to minimum wage and holiday pay for the first time.¹⁶

In 2014 a government commissioned report identified 4 possible scenarios for the future of work.¹⁷ The business as usual scenario foresaw *Forced Flexibility* in which incremental innovation leads to modest growth but fewer opportunities and weakened job security for the low-skilled. A second possibility was *The Great Divide* in which society would become two-tiered, with strong high-tech business but an increasing gap between the economic 'haves' and 'have nots.' The third scenario anticipated *Skills Activism* in which, as technological innovation leads to large-scale job losses, political pressure leads in turn to a government-led skills programme. Finally, *Innovation Adaptation* conceived a stagnant economy where improved productivity is achieved only through rigorous use of technology based solutions.



More recently, a report on the future of work from MIT, published in November 2020, notes the following

If our research did not confirm the dystopian vision of robots ushering workers off of factory floors or artificial intelligence rendering superfluous human expertise and judgment, it did uncover something equally pernicious: [...] we found a labour market in which the fruits are so unequally distributed, so skewed toward the top, that the majority of workers have tasted only a tiny morsel of a vast harvest.¹⁹

Place of work in creation and Kingdom

In Scripture and in our tradition there is a rich theology of work from the Garden of Eden to the new Jerusalem, from the gentle wisdom of the Book of Proverbs to the parables of Jesus. There is also

¹⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-56123668>

¹⁷ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/303335/the_future_of_work_key_findings_edit.pdf

¹⁸ Image credit <https://i.pinimg.com/736x/eb/5f/e0/eb5fe0eb05424a900336b937a28521c6.jpg>

¹⁹ <https://workofthefuture.mit.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2020-Final-Report4.pdf>

much ethical instruction about the right treatment of workers. But that theology is undeveloped for the 21st Century and we need to give our own scriptures greater weight. The Book of Isaiah ends with a striking focus on what makes for a good human society, including good work and labour:

“No more shall there be (in Jerusalem) an infant who lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime.....They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit....my chosen shall enjoy the work of their hands”.

Good, purposeful, and properly compensated work is a key part of God’s vision for human flourishing. ‘For the scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain,” and, “The labourer deserves to be paid.”’ (1Timothy 5:18).

These deeply Christian principles are embedded in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 8: ‘Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.’ They are also echoed in the government commissioned Taylor Review on the future of work.²⁰ The government has accepted the recommendations of the report, published in 2018, and the need for society to focus on the quality as well as the quantity of work, but a new Employment Bill is still awaited.

A Practical response

In the interim, Carnegie UK and the RSA have identified a number of practical measures of job quality.²¹

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| 1. Security: | Minimum guaranteed hours; underemployment. |
| 2. Pay and benefits: | Pay (actual); satisfaction with pay. |
| 3. Safety & psychosocial wellbeing: | Physical injury; mental health. |
| 4. Nature of work: | Use of skills; control; opportunities / progression & purpose |
| 5. Social support and cohesion: | Peer support; line manager relationship. |
| 6. Voice and Representation; | Union membership; employee information & involvement. |
| 7. Work-life balance; | Under/over-employment; overtime (paid and unpaid) |

Christians should welcome any technology that augments human dignity and worth through work, while resisting every technological application that requires human beings to behave more like computers. In line with the five marks of mission, we are called to challenge general economic features and business models that harm and impoverish millions around the world.²² And we should

²⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/good-work-the-taylor-review-of-modern-working-practices>

²¹ https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/carnegie_uk_trust/2018/09/03132649/Measuring-Good-Work-EXEC-SUMMARY-03-09-18.pdf

²² <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/201711/MTAG%20The%205%20Marks%20of%20Mission.pdf>

hold civil society to account for its provision and protection of the common good.²³ The proliferation of food banks despite a low headline unemployment rate prior to the pandemic indicates a deeper structural problem with contemporary work.²⁴

More beneficially, however, technology can also be used to monitor the terms and conditions of the gig economy systematically. This is the impetus behind Fair.work.²⁵ The programme's goal is to show that better and fairer jobs are possible in the platform economy by highlighting best and worst labour practices. The project is based at the Oxford Internet Institute and the WZB Berlin Social Science Centre. It currently operates in 20 countries collaboratively benchmarking platform work to build a fairer future by using a global network of researchers to rank digital platforms. The five principles Fair.work uses mirror those recognised by Carnegie.

- 1. Fair pay**
- 2. Fair conditions**
- 3. Fair contracts**
- 4. Fair management; and**
- 5. Fair representation.**

In our own practical response, we can combine the demands of the marks of mission with the benefits of technology by exercising personal responsibility for our own use of apps and platforms with a record of poor worker treatment. We can, and should, avoid exploitative businesses, proactively support local business as well as the online retailers, and tip delivery drivers. All are examples of hands-on ways of standing with marginalised groups, including many contractors now occupying key worker roles. Yet it is not only zero hours and gig economy workers under threat. Employees may now find their own terms and conditions more precarious and themselves potentially subject to dismissal and re-employment on inferior terms and conditions, a tactic recently threatened by companies as large as British Airways.²⁶ It remains to be seen how secure employment rights in the UK remain following the end of EU membership and the transition process.²⁷

²³ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2021/02/08/the-real-impact-of-removing-the-universal-credit-uplift/>

²⁴ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2015/11/18/uk-foodbank-use-still-at-record-levels-as-hunger-remains-major-concern-for-low-income-families/>

²⁵ <https://fair.work/>

²⁶ <https://unitetheunion.org/campaigns/ba-betrayal/>

²⁷ <https://www.ft.com/content/55588f86-a4f8-4cf3-aecb-38723b787569>

Synod motion

In sum, then, the central significance of work as we emerge from the pandemic and navigate a 4th IR, the opportunity to fulfil our duty to stand with the marginalised globally by endorsing the Fair.work project, and the need for a contemporary theological account of 21st Century work and working practices, all motivate the motion for debate at this Diocesan Synod.