

GENERAL SYNOD**The Future of Work
A Note from the Secretary General****Summary**

This paper gives some background information to the paper from the Diocese of Oxford, on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the UK labour market and points briefly to the ways in which technological developments might be influencing the quality and nature of jobs. Recognising that the motion covers a very large field of enquiry, it notes how the Faith and Public Life team is attempting to stay abreast of the issues and ethical questions. It spells out the Fairwork Principles mentioned in the motion. The paper notes that this is not the first time Synod has debated the ethics of work and proposes a way to offer Synod some helpful theological reflections within a viable time period.

The Context

The motion cites three main areas of societal and economic change which are behind high levels of uncertainty in the labour market – the emergence globally of new forms of working, the rise of new technologies including Artificial Intelligence, and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on employment patterns. Evaluating the combined impact of these factors is complex as they are following different trajectories. For example, the development of new technologies continues all the time, although the rate of change is becoming more rapid. On the other hand, the Covid pandemic caused a huge and immediate disruption to patterns of work, but these are slowly reverting to something closer to (but not identical with) the pre-pandemic situation. New patterns of working are, to a great extent, consequences of these and other trends – for instance, responses to the possibilities for remote working demonstrated in the pandemic, and the rise of jobs driven by algorithms (such as Uber drivers) and the replacement of jobs by automation.

So this motion covers a great deal of ground on which research and analysis continues and where definitive conclusions can be hard to draw.

Involvement by Faith and Public Life

The Faith and Public Life team has been following the changes to the post-pandemic labour market through membership of the Advisory Group of *ReWage*, a multi-disciplinary alliance of academics and others in the field, convened by Warwick and Leeds Universities, which is the equivalent for employment of the Sage group which gave expert medical advice to the Government during the pandemic. *ReWage* has produced numerous briefing papers which anyone interested in the issues around the motion will find valuable. <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/rewage/about/>

Faith and Public Life is a partner in the Centre for Doctoral Training in Accountable, Responsible and Transparent AI at the University of Bath and is thus involved in the debate about the actual and potential impact of new technologies on employment.

The Impact of the Pandemic¹

The beginning of the pandemic along with the first coronavirus lockdown in March 2020 had a dramatic effect on the labour market. The number of people in work fell by 825,000 people between January-March 2020 and October-December 2020, while unemployment rose by almost 400,000 and the number of people who were economically inactive rose by 327,000. Redundancies reached record highs while UK working hours dropped to the lowest since 1994. The number of people claiming unemployment benefits doubled between March and May 2020.

However since the pandemic, there has been a recovery in the labour market. By the start of 2021, employment and unemployment levels began to improve but economic inactivity continued to grow, peaking in December 2021-February 2022 at 8.89 million, nearly 450,000 more than in January-March 2020. This means that two years after the start of the pandemic, employment levels were still around 350,000 lower than they had been before it began. This was despite unemployment falling below pre-pandemic levels. In January-March 2022, redundancies were below pre-pandemic levels, and job vacancies at record highs. It is clear that there are fewer people in the labour market than before the pandemic and this is likely to be caused by a number of factors including long term sickness.

Some workers were disproportionately economically impacted by the pandemic.

- Unemployment rates for minority ethnic groups were higher than average before the pandemic and saw a larger increase between January-March 2020 and January to March 2022. People from minority ethnic group were more likely to experience a loss of income at the beginning of the pandemic. While unemployment rates have risen more for minority ethnic groups over the pandemic, employment rates have also risen due to decreases in economic inactivity rates.
- Employment among men has fallen slightly more than among women over the pandemic. An increase in economic inactivity for men means that women made up over 48% of the workforce in January-March 2022, a record high.
- The youngest and oldest workers were most likely to lose their jobs or be furloughed at the beginning of the pandemic. Youth employment recovered quickly from spring 2021, and had nearly returned to pre-pandemic levels by January-March 2022. Many older workers opted to retire early.
- Low paid workers were more likely to be in sectors most affected by the pandemic, particularly hospitality and non-essential retail, so were most likely to be furloughed or experience falls in income at the beginning of the pandemic. However, the rise in vacancies in 2021 and 2022 was driven by low paying jobs and by February 2022 unemployment rates in low occupation had almost completely recovered.
- The employment gap between disabled people and people without disabilities widened during the pandemic, before returning to close to pre-pandemic levels.

Technological Change

This is an area where generalisations are almost sure to be wrong. Part of the ethical problem around AI is that technological change is so much more rapid than processes of moral reflection in society that ethics can't keep up. But it is probably wisest to approach

¹ Source: House of Commons Library: Research Report – Coronavirus: Impact on the Labour Market. [Coronavirus: Impact on the labour market - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk/research-and-factsheets/2020/11/coronavirus-impact-on-the-labour-market)

AI, machine learning and robotics as tools with numerous applications and to focus more upon how they are deployed within the economy.

A simple example may be helpful. In social care, much is being made of the potential for so-called “Chat bots” (like “Alexa”) to offer the simulacrum of conversation to lonely and housebound people. Leaving aside the question of whether interaction with a machine is at all equivalent to human contact, problems arise about the role of carers. Already, carers have little enough time for social interaction with clients. If it is assumed that the social needs of the client can be met through the technology, the economics of the under-funded care industry could easily reduce further the time allowed with each client, leaving only the physical actions that cannot be performed by robots to the care worker. Quickly, the human worker has been reduced to delivering the least human aspects of the role, since robots are not good at washing people’s bodies or bandaging ulcers, whilst the roles best suited to a human being – social contact and engagement – have been taken from the worker. Such a process is not inevitable, but crudely applied economics combined with (perhaps) an over-optimistic perception of technology, could easily lead to that outcome.

This example (and one could cite many others) suggests that the ethical problems of AI and related technologies are most acute in the way they are implemented rather than in the technology itself. New technological developments will continue to raise novel dilemmas and unintended consequences, but this is where some broadly-agreed principles of ethical conduct in applying technology to human work can be valuable.

The Fairwork Principles

Fairwork is a project based at the University of Oxford’s Internet Institute. Fairwork evaluates the work conditions of digital labour platforms internationally, and scores individual platforms on how well, or how poorly, they do. The project has developed five principles of fair work that digital platforms should comply with. The nature of the proposals in the five principles reveals the areas where bad practices often to be found.

Fair Pay: Workers, irrespective of their employment classification, should earn a decent income in their home jurisdiction after taking account of work-related costs and active hours worked. They should be paid on time and for all work completed.

Fair Conditions: Platforms should have policies in place to protect workers from foundational risks arising from the processes of work, and should take proactive measures to protect and promote the health and safety of workers.

Fair Contracts: Terms and conditions should be transparent, concise and always accessible to workers. The party contracting with the worker must be subject to local law and must be identified in the contract. Workers are notified of proposed changes in a reasonable timeframe before changes come into effect. The contract is free of clauses which unreasonably exclude liability on the part of the platform, and which prevent workers from seeking redress for grievances. Contracts should be consistent with the terms of workers’ engagement on the platform.

Fair Management: There should be a documented due process for decisions affecting workers. Workers must have the ability to appeal decisions made affecting them, such as disciplinary actions and deactivation, and be informed of the reasons behind those decisions. The use of algorithms is transparent and results in equitable outcomes for

workers. There should be an identifiable and documented policy that ensures equity in the way workers are managed on a platform (for example in the hiring, disciplining or firing of workers).

Fair Representation: Platforms should provide a documented process through which worker voice can be expressed. Irrespective of their employment classification, workers have the right to organise in collective bodies, and platforms should be prepared to cooperate and negotiate with them.

These five principles are applicable to all types of work, regardless of whether workers are classified as employees or independent contractors, and regardless of where and how they work. See: <https://fair.work/en/fw/principles/>

These principles are likely to appear unremarkable to the majority of people in “traditional” forms of employment. The fact that they need to be spelled out in the context of many digital labour platforms is indicative of the shift of power from workers to companies which these platforms have made possible. Of 12 companies in the UK surveyed by Fairwork in 2023, one achieves a score of 8/10 whilst four score 0. (<https://fair.work/en/ratings/uk/>). Similar figures appear in research on other European companies.

Theology of Work

Whilst the motion calls for new theological work on “work”, it is worth remembering that there is a good deal of theological material already available. Perhaps the most authoritative work in this field is by the late Revd Dr John Hughes in his book, *The End of Work* (Blackwell: 2006) – a study of the theological purposes of work rather than predictions of its cessation.

Synod debated questions on the theology of work in July 2008 following a Diocesan Synod motion from St Albans. The motion called for a theological study of work and this was delivered through a set of six essays from different strands of the Christian tradition, published in the journal *Crucible* for Jan—Mar 2011 and circulated to all Synod members at that time. These essays (including one by John Hughes) from theologians actively studying questions of work and human labour, remain extremely pertinent to present day questions. They fulfil the proper role of theology in exploring fundamental questions and establishing basic principles which can then be used to reflect upon specific issues and instances.

As capacity in both the Faith and Public Life team and FAOC is considerably limited at present by other priority areas of work, a straightforward and timely response to the motion would be for FPL to republish the *Crucible* essays with an additional section seeking to apply the themes of the essays to the questions raised for human labour by more recent technological changes.

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