GENERAL SYNOD

The Future of Work

Summary

Work is being dramatically transformed by three great challenges. First the repercussions for financial markets and globalisation of pandemic, inflation, and growing political tensions. [1] Secondly, the implications of a novel general purpose technology, AI, that characterises a new industrial revolution.[2] Thirdly, the impacts of the twin climate and ecological emergencies triggered by outstripping the planet's natural productive resources.[3]

The amount of work is changing, the type and quality of work are changing, and the economic nature of work is changing. New technology threatens to eliminate more jobs than it will replace without any process for sharing the costs and benefits equitably across society.

Work is a central theological as well as anthropological concern and the inherent value and dignity of good work in human flourishing should be affirmed.

In line with the five marks of mission Christians should welcome any technology that augments human dignity and worth in work while resisting anything that exploits or requires humans to behave more like computers. This problem is especially common in the gig economy but the Fair.work initiative offers an effective way to measure five core measures of good work in the platform economy.

New technologies like AI, allied with broader changes to society, pose threats as well as opportunities that demand a recontextualised theology of work as we navigate the complex and challenging transitions this new industrial revolution will entail.

Motion:

'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) call 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.'

1. How the Future Looked a Decade Ago
1.1. In 2014 a government commissioned report identified 4 possible scenarios for the future of work.[4]
   - *Forced Flexibility.* Incremental innovation leading to modest growth but fewer opportunities and weakened job security for the low-skilled.
   - *The Great Divide.* A two-tiered, divided, society with strong high-tech businesses reinforcing a divergence between the economic 'haves' and 'have nots.'

- *Skills Activism.* Technological innovation automates white-collar work, provoking large-scale job losses, political pressure, and a government-led skills programme.
- *Innovation Adaptation.* A stagnant economy where any improved productivity is achieved through rigorous implementation of digital solutions.

1.2. Covid-19 exposed sharp social and economic differences across the economy not least the significance of 'essential worker', access to furlough, and the abrupt transition to remote working.[5] Beyond this immediate backdrop future roles must navigate a growing distinction between 'employee' and 'contractor' and the weakening of collective bargaining, [6] the long term downward pressure on wages through different modes of globalisation, and a persistent dilution of the United Kingdom's social safety net.[7]

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

2. The amount of work is changing

2.1. Previous industrial revolutions have tended to make nations wealthier by creating more new jobs than they replace and by augmenting those tasks that remain. More Than 60% of Jobs Done in 2018 had not yet been "invented" in 1940.[8] But, in the short run, this industrial and technological upheaval impoverishes individuals and regions and, for some, that upheaval will last a lifetime.

2.2. Furthermore, this latest AI mediated industrial revolution may be the first to eliminate more well-paid jobs than it creates. In 1990, for example, the top three US car makers had a market capitalisation of $36 billion and employed 1.2 million people. But in 2020, Silicon Valley's top three companies' market value exceeded $4.5 trillion yet they only employed 341,000 people between them.[9]

2.3. In 2019 robot process Automation (RPA) was forecast to replace up to 500,000 UK retail sector jobs by 2025,[10] but COVID-19 accelerated the transition from high street to digital/warehouse[11] and according to a 2023 report AI will now soon enable 'dark warehouses' where *every* role is automated.[12] Simultaneously, a new suite of so-called 'generative AI' tools are expected to radically transform the nature of office work over the next few years as well.[13]

2.4. The global jobs gap, a measure of the unmet need for employment, stood at 473 million people in 2022, meaning around 12 per cent of working age people globally do not currently have a job opportunity of any kind.[14]

2.5. Underemployment is becoming a bigger issue in the UK too, despite the low headline jobless rate. In spring 2020 the number of people on zero hours contracts rose to over a million, up 80% since 2013. An estimated 1 in 10 workers in Britain now work on short-term or freelance contracts in the 'gig economy' rather than as permanent employees. The Institute for Fiscal Studies[15] (IFS) found that 29% of those on zero hours contracts in the UK are underemployed, almost 4 times the incidence in the wider working population. Some workers enjoy the flexibility of the so-called gig economy but many accept zero hours, agency, or self-employed contracts only because they cannot find a more secure option. Moreover, the Living Wage Foundation has calculated that 40% of workers suffering income insecurity are parents, contradicting the image of agency or gig work as a lifestyle choice by independent young adults. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has identified underemployment as a driver of rising levels of in-work poverty.[16]

2.6. According to the World Economic Forum, over the next five years (2023-28) employers predict a structural labour market churn of 23% of jobs – a combination of 10.2% job

growth but also a 12.3% decline. In addition, they anticipate that 44% of workers' skills will be disrupted over the same period.[17] In his 2020 book *A World Without Work*, Oxford professor Daniel Susskind says

    (a) 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.[18]

3. The type and quality of work is changing

3.1. During the inter-war years manufacturing accounted for about 25% of UK GDP but this fell to less than 10% by 2016. The last two decades have seen a 43% increase in the UK's self-employed population, bringing the total to more than 5 million workers by the start of 2020.[19]

3.2. The pandemic has significantly accelerated the growth of remote working. In September 2022, around 1 in 5 (22%) of the GB workforce worked at least one day from home in the previous week. This is almost double the pre-pandemic number. The number now working from home exclusively has almost tripled (from 5% to 13%).[20] Employers and employees both report positive and negative consequences, but one controversial component has been the imposition by some companies of productivity surveillance tools that leave employees feeling spied on,[21] and a blurring of boundaries between home and work that has led to calls for a lawful 'right to switch off.'[22]

3.3. A new digital and knowledge-based form of globalisation is accelerating with online tasks going wherever the labour is cheapest yet without the tell-tale signs of physical migration. This heralds a levelling down of wages and conditions for UK based workers in the 'knowledge economy' as they compete with workers from developing nations.

3.4. An increasing number of jobs are also based on humans working for algorithms dispensed via computers rather than working directly for other people. Delivery riders/drivers, warehouse pickers, and online 'micro-taskers' all respond to algorithmically generated tasks and performance targets for what is, in effect, piece work. Such work can be monotonous, repetitive or, in the case of content moderation, downright harrowing.[23] A 2023 report found more than half of gig workers earn less than minimum wage once time on the app is properly accounted for.[24]

3.5. Even among employees in more conventional roles there is a sense that many contemporary jobs lack meaning or purpose and are "bullshit jobs" as a now famous 2014 article put it.[25]

4. The benefits of work are changing

4.1. By 2019 more than 14% of the UK workforce were contractors engaged in 'solo self-employment' as everything from delivery drivers to airline pilots. Median pre-tax earnings among the solo self-employed in 2018–19 were 30% lower than those among employees. Over half of the solo self-employed earned less than £300 a week, compared with just a third of employees.[26] At the turn of this century – before the proliferation of zero hours platform employment - they were no more likely to have been recently unemployed or inactive than employees, but by 2019 they were 45% more likely to have been without any kind of work in the previous quarter.'[27]

5. Place of work in creation and Kingdom

5.1. In Scripture and in Anglican tradition there is a rich theology of work stemming from the Garden of Eden to the new Jerusalem that includes ethical instruction from Book of Proverbs to the multi-layered parables of Jesus. But that theology needs to be contextualised for a novel 21st Century technological and social

context. 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"

5.2. Good, purposeful, and properly compensated work is a key part of God's vision for human flourishing.[28] '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).

5.3. 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.[29]

6. A Practical response

6.1. Christians should welcome any technology that augments human dignity and worth in work, while resisting anything that requires human beings to behave more like computers. [30] Taking personal responsibility for our own use of apps and platforms with a record of poor worker treatment is a way of standing with marginalised groups. Yet even employees are increasingly finding their own terms and conditions more precarious, vulnerable to 'fire and rehire' in the same role but on worse terms and conditions.[31]

6.2. The proliferation of food banks despite a low headline unemployment rate indicates a deeper structural problem with contemporary work.[32] In line with the five marks of mission, we are called to challenge systemic economic structures and business models that harm and impoverish.[33] Carnegie UK and the RSA have identified a number of practical measures of job quality that can help in assessing the quality of work.[34]

6.3. Technology can also be used to monitor the terms and conditions of the gig economy systemically. This is the impetus behind Fair.work[35]. 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, using a global network of researchers to rank digital platforms based on five principles of fair work; pay; conditions; contracts; management; and representation. The project currently operates internationally, collaboratively benchmarking platform work to build a fairer future.

7. Conclusion

7.1. Three ingredients motivate this motion for debate at General Synod. The inherent function of work in individual and societal flourishing in a world grappling with un- and under-employment. A duty to stand with exploited and marginalised workers, at home and abroad, by endorsing the principles at the heart of the Fair.work project. And the requirement for a contemporary and contextualised theological account of 21st Century work and working practices fit for emergence from the pandemic and a new industrial revolution.

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