

Human vs. Machine: The History of Work [B2]

Si pensava che il progresso e le nuove tecnologie avrebbero portato a un maggiore benessere per la società, ma la storia dimostra che non è sempre stato così. L'iniziativa per promuovere la settimana lavorativa di quattro giorni vorrebbe invertire questa tendenza.



Throughout history, the world of work has been in constant evolution. Each new change has impacted the way we do our work, our personal lives and our mental health. With the development of artificial intelligence (AI) we are facing yet another revolution in our working lives. But are we ready for it? The Industrial Revolution transformed Britain in the 1830s and 1840s, but several innovations were [developed](#) as early as the 1700s; for example, the machinery in textile [mills](#). This led to [unrest](#) among the workers, who, having moved from rural areas to be close to the [mills](#), now feared losing their jobs to machines. Philosophers also worried that the working person's life had been reduced to a monotonous [grind](#).

EIGHT-HOUR DAYS

Luckily, there were some [well-meaning](#) forces. As early as 1810, philanthropic textile manufacturer and social reformer Robert Owen realised that his mill workers' poor [performance](#) was [due to](#) long hours of [drudgery](#) and fear that machines would [replace](#) them. Owen instituted the eight-hour day at his textile mill in New Lanark, Scotland, which he advocated with the famous [slogan](#): "Eight hours' labour, eight hours' recreation, eight hours' rest." During the Industrial Revolution, British factory and mill workers were allowed to stay at home on Sundays to "observe the Sabbath". However, many people preferred to drink, [gamble](#) and [enjoy themselves](#) instead, with the result that they often had [to take Monday off](#) to recover. This unofficial holiday was known as Saint Monday and was so [detrimental](#) to productivity that factory owners decided to make Saturday a half-day in exchange for guaranteed [attendance](#) on Monday.

FIVE-DAY WEEKS

In 1908, a [forward-thinking](#) mill in New England, US, extended the weekend to include Saturday morning, so that its Jewish staff could also observe their [holy day](#). This was such a success with all the workers that other nearby industries soon copied the model of a five-day working week. The practice was officially adopted in the US in 1932 as a way of [countering](#) the [unemployment](#) caused by the Great Depression. [Wherever](#) the two-day weekend was introduced, the results were the same: an [invigorated workforce](#) with more time for family and [leisure](#) activities, reduced absenteeism and greater productivity.

DIGITAL REVOLUTION

Jump forward to the 1980s and the birth of the digital revolution: automated machines, computers and the internet were [heralded](#) as tools for [speeding up](#) and reducing the cost of many working practices. However, as time went by, the introduction of email, messaging services and various administrative softwares allowed work [to encroach](#) on people's daily lives.

Smartphones in particular created a culture of always being available, or 'always on'. For many, this represented a return to the [slog](#) of the past, and a threat to their work-life balance.

THE NEXT REVOLUTION

If these seem like huge changes, they are nothing compared with the revolution [about to take place](#). Artificial intelligence has been presented as a way of [relieving](#) human beings of many monotonous or dangerous tasks. We have, however, heard that argument before! Should we embrace the change or, like the mill workers of the early 1800s, should we fear that AI will supplant humans in more creative and [skilled work](#)? For most people, AI should be just another tool in their working lives and not automatically make them [redundant](#). But how can we be sure that belief in the superiority and the economic benefits of AI will not transcend the reality of its utility — and ours.

Glossary

- **developed** = sviluppare
- **well-meaning** = benintenzionate
- **performance** = rendimento
- **drudgery** = duro lavoro
- **Wherever** = ovunque
- **slog** = sgobbata, lavoraccio
- **replace** = rimpiazzare
- **to take Monday off** = prendersi un giorno libero
- **holy day** = giorno sacro
- **about to take place** = che sta per accadere
- **detrimental** = deleterio, dannoso
- **forward-thinking** = lungimirante
- **speeding up** = accelerare
- **enjoy themselves** = divertirsi
- **unemployment** = disoccupazione
- **skilled work** = lavoro qualificato
- **redundant** = superfluo
- **countering** = contrastare
- **workforce** = forza lavoro
- **to encroach** = sconfinare, interferire
- **due to** = dovuto a
- **invigorated** = invigorita
- **heralded** = annunciare
- **unrest** = inquietudine
- **gamble** = scommettere
- **attendance** = presenza
- **mills** = fabbriche
- **grind** = routine, tran-tran
- **leisure** = svago, relax
- **relieving** = alleviare