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Why the Attention Economy Cannot Absorb “Labor Refugees”

Introduction

As the global economy evolves, workers displaced by technological change (“labor refugees”) are often forced to seek jobs in emerging sectors. Historically, labor has transitioned through **four economic paradigms**: (1) **Agriculture** (agrarian economies), (2) **Manufacturing** (industrial economies), (3) **Service** economies, and now (4) the nascent **Experience/Meaning/Attention** economy. Each paradigm shift has reduced labor demand in the old sectors while creating new types of work in the next. However, the **attention/experience economy** – which monetizes human attention, experiences, and meaning (e.g. entertainment, digital content creation, social media influence) – has fundamental limitations that make it incapable of absorbing all the displaced workers from the declining sectors. This report examines these limitations through an academic, data-driven lens, focusing on the U.S., OECD, and global context. In summary, the **value of human attention is intrinsically low**, the **total supply of monetizable attention is finite**, and thus the **attention economy cannot generate enough high-value jobs for all displaced workers**. We provide historical context for earlier paradigm shifts and then model why the simple arithmetic of available human attention and its economic value means many “labor refugees” will outnumber the new opportunities in the meaning economy.

From Agriculture to Manufacturing: Diminishing Labor Needs

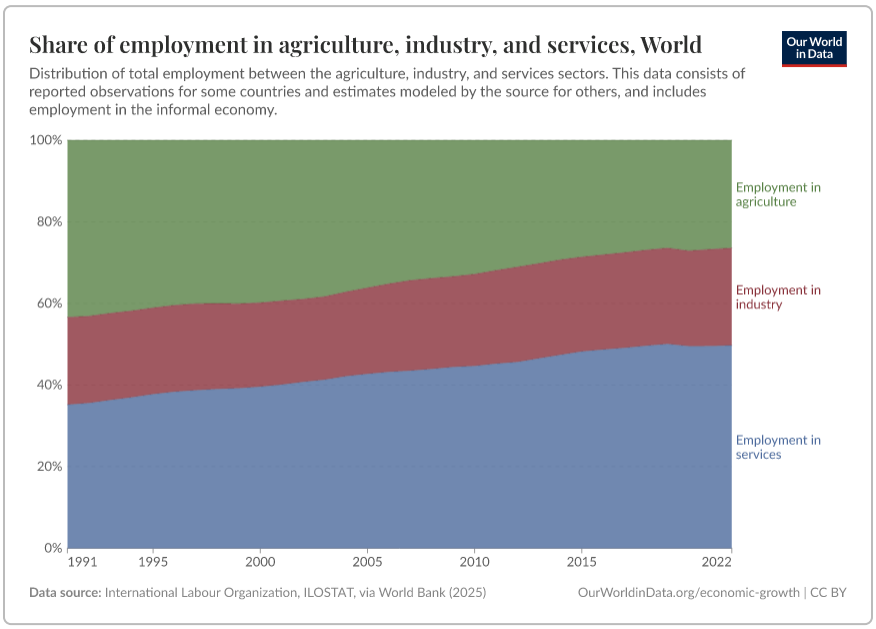

Figure: Global Shift of Employment from Agriculture to Industry to Services (World, 1991–2022). *Agriculture (green area) has steadily declined as a share of world employment, while services (blue) surpassed 50% by 2020. Industry (red) has remained relatively flat around 20%【44†】.*

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, agriculture was the dominant employer in both rich and developing countries. The United States, for example, had about **40% of its workforce on farms in 1900**, but due to mechanization this fell to **around 1.9% by 2000** [1]. Absolute farm employment in the U.S. peaked at ~12 million in 1920 and then fell by about two-thirds over the subsequent decades [2]. This dramatic decline was mirrored in Europe and other advanced economies as tractors, harvesters, and chemical fertilizers boosted productivity. A similar pattern later occurred in manufacturing. In the U.S., manufacturing employment **peaked in 1979 at 19.6 million workers**, then steadily declined to about 12.8 million by 2019 [3]. That represents a drop from roughly **22% of U.S. jobs in 1979 to under 8–9% by the 2010s** [4]. In other words, both agriculture and factory work went from employing huge swaths of the labor force to only a small fraction, even while output reached record highs (a testament to automation and productivity gains). Europe and Japan saw the same trend: for instance, manufacturing's share of employment in many OECD countries also fell into the single digits by the 21st century. Developing Asian economies somewhat bucked the trend mid-century by industrializing (China's factories, for example, absorbed millions of workers from farms), but even in the developing world **manufacturing is peaking earlier and at lower employment levels** – a phenomenon economists call *"premature deindustrialization"* [5] [6]. In countries like India and Mexico, manufacturing remains relatively small as a employer, and workers have instead shifted directly into services or informal work without ever having a large industrial workforce [7] [8].

The historical pattern is clear: **technology eliminated the need for most farm labor, then much of factory labor**. Each time, displaced workers eventually moved into new sectors (first manufacturing, then services). Now we stand at another inflection point. **Service industries** (from retail to healthcare to finance) grew throughout the late 20th century to absorb the majority of jobs – today services comprise about **70% of all jobs in advanced OECD economies** [9] and just over **50% of global employment**【44†】. But service employment may be at or near its peak. **Automation and AI are poised to eliminate many service and clerical jobs** in the coming years, much as mechanization did in farming and robots did in factories. For example, early 2020s advances in AI can already handle routine office tasks, customer service queries, basic accounting, and even some diagnostic and legal work. The World Economic Forum's 2023 analysis warns that clerical and secretarial roles (such as bank tellers, data entry clerks, administrative support) are **among the jobs likely to decline fastest due to AI** [10]. Accenture estimates that up to **40% of all working hours** could be impacted or partly automated by large language model AIs in the near future [11]. In short, the **service sector is next in line for automation-fueled disruption**, meaning tens of millions of service workers globally may become "labor refugees" seeking new types of work.

Paradigm 4 – The Rise of the Experience/Attention Economy

Facing the prospect of widespread service-sector automation, optimists point to a growing "Experience" or "Meaning" economy as the next outlet for human labor. This concept – famously articulated by Pine & Gilmore in 1998 – posits that economies evolve from selling commodities, to goods, to services, and finally to **selling experiences** [12]. In the **experience/attention economy**, businesses and individuals create value by capturing human attention or providing meaning and experiential value. Examples include digital content creators (YouTubers, streamers, influencers), online educators and entertainers, artists and performers, gaming streamers, "experience curators" in tourism and hospitality, life coaches, even people selling personal companionship or guidance (sometimes cited examples are paid "trip sitters" for

therapeutic psychedelic sessions, or professional mentors, etc.). In essence, this paradigm revolves around monetizing intangibles – **human attention, engagement, and meaningful experiences** – rather than physical labor or rote service tasks. It's often said that in a world where material goods are abundant, **human attention becomes the scarce commodity** [13] [14]. Indeed, Herbert Simon as early as 1971 noted that a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention, making attention a bottleneck resource in an information-rich economy [14].

On the surface, the attention economy is already booming. The global "creator economy," for instance – encompassing social media influencers, independent creators on platforms like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Patreon, etc. – is estimated at **$250+ billion in annual revenue** in the mid-2020s [15]. It is attracting significant investment and is projected to grow at double-digit rates (some forecasts suggest it could exceed $500 billion by 2030 and even approach $1 trillion by the mid-2030s in optimistic scenarios) [16]. Likewise, the broader experience economy (travel, live entertainment, theme parks, immersive events, etc.) is rebounding and expanding as consumers increasingly seek personalized, memorable experiences. This sector *is* creating new jobs – from content creators and podcast producers to experience designers and virtual reality performers. However, **even though the attention/meaning economy is on the rise, it faces a fundamental scalability problem: it cannot absorb all displaced workers because of basic economic math regarding human attention.** To understand this, we need to examine **the low monetary value of attention** and **the finite supply of audience attention** in the economy.

The Economic Value of Human Attention is Tiny (Cents per Hour)

A core challenge is that **human attention, as a product, is worth very little per unit** – often just a few cents or dollars *per hour* – under prevailing business models. Most of the attention economy today is monetized through advertising or low-cost subscriptions. This yields surprisingly low revenue per hour of user engagement. Tech thinker Kevin Kelly famously analyzed media industries and found that an hour of a consumer's attention generates on the order of **$0.10 to $0.50** in ad revenue for many ad-supported media platforms – *"really cheap"* in his words [17]. For example, television, which dominates attention time, only earned about **$0.20 of advertising revenue per viewer hour** (roughly "coolie labor" wages, Kelly quipped) [18]. Newspapers historically monetized attention a bit better (around $0.93 per hour in the print era) [19], and some premium online platforms can exceed $1/hour, but these are exceptions. On average, companies in the 2010s valued our attention at roughly **$2.50 per hour**, according to Kelly's calculation – which he noted is only **one-quarter of a U.S. minimum wage hour** [20]. More recent data from social media confirm the low valuations: for instance, Twitter in 2023 was earning only about **$0.05–$0.06 in revenue per user-hour** of attention on the platform [21]. Even with improvements, Twitter's CEO (Elon Musk) hoped to raise that to perhaps $0.25/hour – still well under a dollar [22].

To put these figures in perspective: if a worker tried to "sell" eight hours of their own attention per day at $0.20–$0.50/hour (the typical going rate paid by advertisers), they'd make perhaps **$1.60 to $4.00 per day**. Even at the higher $2.50/hour average estimate (which includes some premium content), a person devoting 8 hours a day, 5 days a week to consuming monetized content would generate only about **$500 per month** in revenue [23]. *"If you sell your attention full time… you would make around $500 a month,"* Kelly notes – roughly the income of a poorer-than-average resident of China [23]. In other words, *full-time attention consumption doesn't even pay a poverty-level wage*. Now, consider what this means for content *creators*: a creator can only earn significant income if they can capture the attention of many viewers/listeners at once (since each viewer-hour is only worth cents). A musician playing a live show to 100 people for 1 hour generates perhaps 100 hours of audience attention – which, at say $0.20/hour (if monetized via ads or ticket

revenue), might yield $20 total. A YouTuber who uploads a 10-minute video viewed by 10,000 people gets about 1.67k hours of attention; even at $0.10–$0.20/hour (YouTube ad rates), that's on the order of $200–$300 of ad revenue – which is decent for one video, but far from a living unless one can produce viral content regularly. The *vast majority* of online videos, streams, podcasts, etc. have far smaller audiences and thus earn only a few dollars each or less.

The low unit value of attention is a structural constraint. It stems from the economics of advertising and digital content: advertisers pay only a few dollars per thousand impressions (CPM), and subscription fees for content platforms are often under $10/month for unlimited consumption. As a result, an hour of one person's time just doesn't translate to much money. Some experiences can capture higher revenue per hour – for example, a concert where each attendee pays $50 for a 2-hour experience yields $25/hour per attendee, or a personal coach might charge $30+ for a one-hour session – but these cases are limited to scenarios where a small audience pays a premium. **In general, attention is cheap**: we each have 16-18 waking hours a day that we *must* spend one way or another (we can't bank attention for later), and in aggregate that flood of available attention time drives the "price" down [24] [18]. As Kelly put it, *"we have to surrender [our attention] second by second…we can't hoard it,"* which makes it a **perishable, low-cost commodity** despite its fundamental scarcity [24] [25]. This basic fact – that an hour of human attention is only worth a few cents or dollars in the market – severely caps the total revenue (and thus wages) that the entire attention economy can generate, as we explore next.

Limited Supply of Attention: Not Enough to Employ Everyone

While attention is in some sense scarce (each person has a finite number of hours in a day), the **total pool of human attention** available globally is huge in raw hours – yet **still not nearly enough to support billions of people all trying to earn livelihoods by monetizing attention**. There are about 8 billion people on Earth. Assuming, say, ~4 billion of them are regular participants in the monetized attention economy (with internet or media access) and each has a few hours a day of discretionary attention for media/experiences, we might estimate on the order of **trillions of hours** of human attention available per year. However, multiplying trillions of hours by only a few cents or even a couple dollars per hour yields a global attention economy on the order of only a few *trillion* dollars of revenue at most. In fact, current data suggest it's far smaller: the entire global advertising industry – which essentially monetizes attention – is roughly $700 billion per year in 2023, and even adding paid content (streaming subscriptions, tickets, etc.) the total "experience economy" revenue is in the low single-digit trillions of dollars. By comparison, global GDP is around $100 trillion, and global labor income is a substantial fraction of that. Simply put, **there is not enough monetizable human attention to pay for the full employment of all workers at decent incomes** if they were all to become entertainers, influencers, or experience providers.

We can do a rough illustrative calculation: Suppose one displaced worker needs an income of \$40,000 per year (roughly a living wage in many developed regions). If they attempt to earn this through capturing attention, and each hour of audience attention they get is worth, say, \$0.20, then they need **200,000 hours of other people's attention** per year directed at their content to hit \$40k. 200,000 hours is about 22.8 **years** worth of continuous attention. In practical terms, that means our worker needs, for example, 1,000 people to watch 3.5 hours of their content *every week*, year-round. Or equivalently, 10,000 followers who watch ~20 minutes of content per week. That's not utterly impossible for a talented creator – but it's a **very high bar** that only a small minority of creators ever achieve. Now multiply this scenario by millions of displaced workers: **Is there enough audience attention in the world for millions of new creators all to have 10,000 devoted fans?** Highly unlikely. There are only so many hours in the day that each member of

the audience can watch or listen. If everyone becomes a content producer, by definition there aren't enough consumers. **The pool of attention (and consumer spending on attention) is limited**, and as more would-be entertainers join the fray, each one gets a smaller slice of the pie.

We already see evidence of **saturation in the creator/attention market**. As of 2025, there are an estimated **207 million active content creators worldwide** (across various platforms) [26] – a staggering number attempting to draw an audience. But the **vast majority cannot make a living at it**. According to surveys, **only about 4% of creators earn over \$100,000 a year** (a professional income) [26]. Even looking at full-time creators (who dedicate most of their working hours to content), **only 12% make above \$50,000/year**, while **nearly half (48%) of full-time creators earn less than \$1,000 annually** from their content [27]. In other words, a huge share of people trying to live off the attention economy are effectively earning *nothing or next to nothing*. For part-time or aspiring creators, the earnings distribution is even more skewed – **68% make under \$1,000 per year** from their content side-gig, and a mere **3%** manage to surpass \$50k [28]. These statistics make it painfully clear that **the attention economy is winner-take-all** (or more accurately, winner-take-most). A small fraction of top creators, artists, and media franchises capture a disproportionate chunk of audience attention and revenue, while the long tail of millions of others split the remaining scraps of attention, each getting too little to translate into meaningful income. If suddenly *everyone* flooded into this sector (as labor refugees from other sectors), it would not magically create equivalent new demand. It would simply mean **more people competing for the same finite eyeballs and ears**, driving the average attention revenue per creator even lower. As the user prompt aptly put it, *"if everyone becomes a comedian, that would dilute the demand."* There are only so many comedy shows an audience can attend or stream; beyond a point, additional comedians just mean smaller crowds per comedian.

Another way to frame the mismatch is to compare **the scale of impending job losses** to the size of the attention economy. Automation and AI could displace tens of millions of workers in the coming decade. A McKinsey Global Institute study projected that by 2030, about **75 million to 375 million workers worldwide may need to switch occupations** due to automation (with a midpoint scenario around 200+ million) [29]. Even the lower end of that range – tens of millions – is a massive number of people. Meanwhile, how many sustainable new jobs can the meaning/experience economy create? Let's be generous and say the entire broad "experience economy" (entertainment, arts, recreation, tourism, content creation, personal services, etc.) could be worth a few trillion dollars globally. At, say, \$50,000 per job, **each trillion dollars of revenue could support 20 million jobs**. So even a \$5 trillion sector (which is likely far above its current size) might support on the order of 100 million jobs. And many of those jobs already exist today – we're not going from zero to \$5T; we're maybe going from \$2T to \$5T in the coming years. In contrast, the service sector globally employs billions. No realistic expansion of the attention/experience market can absorb hundreds of millions of workers **without drastically reducing average incomes** in that sector. Indeed, we may already be seeing this: digital content creation has a very low median income precisely because so many people are doing it. The **"experience economy" cannot be labor-intensive enough** to provide full employment at decent wages, because its primary input (human attention from paying consumers) is constrained. This is in stark contrast to past sectors: agriculture and manufacturing were highly labor-intensive early on and could absorb masses of unskilled workers (until technology reduced that need). The attention economy, by contrast, is not labor-intensive in the same way – adding more performers or content creators doesn't linearly increase output, because output (views, clicks, tickets sold) is limited by audience attention and spending, not by the supply of creators.

Exceptions: Niche High-Value Time vs. the Averages

It is true that **some human experiences can command high prices** – and those will continue to exist and even grow. For example, one hour of a top surgeon's attention (surgery) can be worth thousands of dollars, an hour on stage for a famous musician can earn tens of thousands, a personal consultation with a renowned expert might bill at \$500/hour, etc. These represent areas where human skill or authenticity is very scarce and in high demand. In the realm of meaning/experience, we might cite things like guided adventure tours, bespoke consulting, celebrity performances, elite education, or immersive live events – experiences for which people will pay a premium, sometimes far above \$0.20/hour. However, these **high-value niches are limited and often scale poorly**. They often require unique talent or reputation and can still only serve a limited audience at once (there's only one Beyoncé filling stadiums, only so many slots for world-class surgeons or top-tier consultants). If *everyone* tries to move into these niches, by definition they cease to be premium. **If millions of people suddenly trained to be "experience guides" or musicians, most would find no audience willing to pay premium prices** – the supply would overwhelm the niche demand. We see a microcosm of this on platforms like Twitch or Patreon: a handful of creators make a fortune, a middling tier scrape by, and the vast majority earn pocket change. The presence of a few well-paid outliers does not imply the sector can scale to employ all comers; on the contrary, it often indicates the sector's limited capacity (only so many stars can be supported by the available audience).

Thus, while **some individuals will successfully find meaningful employment in the attention/experience economy (and society will certainly benefit from their creative contributions)**, it **cannot be the primary solution for the masses of workers** displaced by automation. For most people, time spent trying to capture others' attention yields very low productivity (in dollar terms). The overall "meaning economy" will likely remain a relatively small slice of GDP and employment. Even optimistic analyses of future job growth (including those by McKinsey and others) foresee new jobs coming from sectors like healthcare, education, green energy, and technology – not just from entertainment or arts. These new jobs still largely fall under "services" broadly defined, not pure attention-trading. In other words, the economy may create new kinds of roles (e.g. robot maintenance, data science, care work, etc.) that absorb some labor, but *those aren't* about monetizing audience attention – they're extensions of the service/tech sector. The pure **attention monetization roles will remain comparatively limited**.

Conclusion: Simple Calculus of Attention vs. Labor Supply

Ultimately, it comes down to a **simple calculus**, as the prompt suggests. There are **only so many hours of human attention available**, and each hour of attention is worth a relatively **small amount of money** (pennies to a few dollars). Therefore, the total revenue that the attention/experience economy can generate is inherently capped by *population* × *hours* × *value per hour*. Even though this sector will grow and people will increasingly spend money on experiences, it will never generate enough economic value to support all the workers who are being displaced from agriculture, manufacturing, and now services, at least not at living wages for all. The orders of magnitude just don't line up: billions of labor hours are looking for new productive uses, but there are only billions (not trillions) of consumer attention hours to allocate, each of low value. **There simply isn't enough human attention to "go around" for everyone to make a living off of it.**

Historical context underscores this conclusion. In prior transitions, new sectors (manufacturing, then services) had the capacity to absorb *most* workers because those sectors generated large increases in economic output and productivity that translated into plenty of jobs and decent wages for a time. The

attention economy, by contrast, does not dramatically multiply economic output with more labor – more YouTube streamers do not create proportional additional consumer spending; they mostly subdivide existing attention. Unless the value per hour of attention were to somehow skyrocket (which would likely require fundamentally new business models or humans suddenly paying much more for content), the attention economy's growth will be constrained.

In the United States and other developed countries, we are already seeing service automation (self-checkout kiosks, AI chatbots, etc.) begin to displace workers, and many ex-service or ex-manufacturing workers have attempted to pivot to gigs in the digital economy – driving Uber, selling crafts online, starting podcasts or streaming – often to find these avenues **crowded and low-paying**. This trend will intensify. On a global scale, organizations like the ILO and World Bank note that while services will continue to expand in developing nations, there is a risk that without industrial jobs or a strong manufacturing base, developing economies will end up with **underemployment in low-productivity service and informal jobs** [30] rather than a creative experience economy nirvana. In short, the **"meaning economy" can supplement but not replace the traditional sectors** in providing mass employment.

To answer the question succinctly: **the attention economy cannot absorb labor refugees because the math doesn't work out**. Human attention is a limited resource, and its market value is low on a per-hour basis [17]. Even though experiences and meaning are increasingly important components of economic value, they cannot by themselves generate enough GDP to employ all the people losing jobs in agriculture, factories, and routine service roles. There are exceptions and success stories, but if everyone tries to make a living by capturing attention – whether as a comedian, influencer, musician, or guru – most will find the demand for their time and talent is effectively zero. **Only a small fraction can thrive in the attention economy, and expanding the supply of labor in that realm mostly just dilutes the income for each.**

Thus, many labor refugees will unfortunately outnumber the viable new roles in the attention/experience sector. This reality poses a significant challenge for policymakers and society: we may need to explore other solutions, such as new industries, educational overhauls, reduced workweeks, or stronger social safety nets, to handle the displacement caused by automation – because expecting the YouTube/TikTok economy or the "experience marketplace" to save the day is, as the evidence shows, wishful thinking unsupported by the economics. The attention economy is rising, but it **cannot become the dominant employer** of the 21st century in the way services, manufacturing, and agriculture once were. It comes down to basic numbers – and the numbers say the attention pie is too small to feed all the workers who need a slice.

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