

#Article - MEANING, PURPOSE AND THE FUTURE OF WORK

Résumé

L'article traite de la question de la signification du travail pour les êtres humains. Même si la technologie pourrait résoudre les besoins matériels, les gens continueraient à se sentir déconnectés, déprimés, ennuyés ou démotivés si leur travail habituel est enlevé. Le travail est la source de notre identité et de notre sens de la signification. Cependant, l'idée de l'allocation universelle de base (UBI) ne résoudrait probablement pas le problème de la perte de sens. Les risques de vivre dans une société algorithmique sont la fragmentation du travail et la perte de perspective sur sa signification. Cela peut conduire à l'aliénation des travailleurs, comme cela s'est produit lors de la révolution industrielle. Les entreprises peuvent prendre des mesures pour reconnecter les employés à la signification de leur travail.

Article

<https://www.mike-walsh.com/blog/future-of-work>

We work for many reasons. For some, it is the need to pay bills and put food on the table, for others - a desire to fund certain lifestyle choices. But if you take a step back and look at human civilization as a whole, you'll realize that there are infinite ways that our needs and desires can be taken care of without us working, in some cases, an eighty-hour week. But would we be happy in an automated, AI-powered world where human labour was no longer required? Not necessarily. Even if we could radically design the economy and leverage technology to take care of all of our material needs, people would still feel alienated, depressed, bored, or disengaged when their usual work is taken away from them. While we might like to believe that we work to live, rather than live to work, the more we understand about our biochemical engineering and the reward systems of our brain, the more apparent it is that we have to work in order for our lives to have meaning and purpose. Work is where we form a sense of identity. It is how we

leverage the skills and experience we have gained over the years, and where we can see the results of our efforts. You don't have to be a champion skier, the CEO of a global corporation, or a rock star for your labors to have personal significance. You just have to connect with your work in a way that provides meaning and a sense of overall purpose. The question of purpose becomes complicated when you consider the controversial proposal of paying everyone a universal basic income (UBI). The UBI is a popular idea with the founders and leaders of many big technology companies, who are understandably nervous about the possibility of mass unrest and social reprisals, as their platforms continue to disrupt traditional industries, jobs and professions. But would it solve the problem of human dissatisfaction? Implementing a UBI would require a radical change to the design of the economy. It might address rising issues of inequality and algorithmic unemployment. Or it might not. Personally, I'm not entirely convinced of its potential. As Luke Martinelli, a researcher at the University of Bath's Institute for Policy Research, has written, "an affordable UBI is inadequate, and an adequate UBI is unaffordable." In either case, a UBI is unlikely to do much to alleviate one of the deeper implications of widespread automation: the loss of human purpose. Those who argue for a UBI point out that with robots and AI capable addressing our material needs, humans might be finally be free to find meaning and purpose in other activities. In a way, something similar happened almost 3,000 years ago. Would we have had the explosion of art and culture in the classical world without the gains in productivity and efficiency that those societies had also achieved? The Ancient Greek philosopher, Thales of Miletus, observed that he was able to devote time to thinking about the world because his society had perfected the practical arts: cultivating crops, herding animals, building high-walled cities, navigating the seas, and defending themselves with well-trained armies. The time freed up by all this efficiency made it possible for him to focus on philosophy instead of being bothered with the practical arts. Of course, presumably those busy in the fields, tending the animals, laying stones, sailing ships, and killing enemies had a different take on life. The classical world had automation too. It took the form of slaves. I don't buy the idea of a world of automated abundance arriving anytime soon. In my view, the real risk of living in an algorithmic society is not that we will have too much time on our hands and nothing to do, but rather that the nature of work will suddenly atomize to the extent that we lose perspective on why we are doing it. The alienation of the worker, a concept that provided popular support for Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto and the revolution that followed it, was a direct result of the fragmented nature of work following the Industrial Revolution. Suddenly, skilled artisans, who had trained for years in perfecting the manufacture of an object or a piece of

clothing, were replaced by a production line made up of thousands of relatively unskilled workers, managed like cogs in a machine. They were given tiny, specialized tasks, like assembling a single component over and over again, without any sense of why it even mattered. Although many employees in organizations today are not factory workers but knowledge workers, there is still the risk of alienation. The desire to reconnect people to the purpose of their work was one of the primary drivers behind Dutch bank ING's decision in 2015 to start a company-wide, agile transformation that empowered its employees to deliver more customer-relevant products, more quickly and flexibly. Inspired by algorithmic companies like Google, Netflix, and Spotify, ING took the radical step of creating 350 nine-person squads, each focused on a specific customer objective. These squads were then affiliated with thirteen tribes (squads with interconnected missions) to ensure that the company kept pushing toward bigger goals. While I was researching my book, The Algorithmic Leader, I spoke with Peter Jacobs, former CIO of ING Bank, and one of the original architects of its transformation program. He explained that people in large companies can lose their sense of purpose if complex projects are broken down into smaller components and the process is essentially turned into virtual assembly lines. That prevents employees from gaining a sense of accountability or ownership over the ultimate objective. "Imagine that you are a brilliant, twenty-five-year-old marketer or engineer. The organization will tell you, 'You are so special. We would like you to work on the most relevant project that we have.' And you go home and your partner asks you, 'Hey, when will you have an impact?' You say, 'Oh, I forgot to ask.' Then you go back the next day and your colleague tells you, 'Well, the first time your customers will enjoy what you're doing is in four years from now.' You have basically killed purpose. You've killed it immediately by the way that you organize yourself." For Jacobs, the key to reigniting a sense of purpose was to bring back the idea of craftsmanship. People not only need to understand the rationale for their work, they also have to be able to see it through from start to finish. In Jacobs's view, sometimes it is better to give people a broader role in a smaller project, because that can help them feel as if they own the results. "Part of recognizing that people are special," Jacobs continued, "is that you don't give them impositions; you give them objectives. You don't tell them that they need to build a bridge; you say to them, let's think together about how to cross the river." It is not only about your team members needing a rationale for their work; it is equally about you needing to find the right rationale for your company's transformation. Leading change in an organization is never easy. It can be political, unpredictable, and terrifying for those involved. If you want people to come along with you for the journey, it helps if you can give them a reason for

why they need to change. Achieving higher profits, lower costs, more market share, or even corporate survival are not as motivating as you might think—none of those are why people work in the first place. The primary driver of your digital transformation should be purpose rather than profit, but that doesn't mean that you need to become a charity or connect your company mission to something that is going to save the world. To be completely honest, I find the idea of every company having a massively transformative purpose kind of ridiculous. Not every company needs to end world hunger, save the environment, or bring unbridled joy into the universe. Sometimes, it is okay to just make high-quality toilet paper, reliable rubber sealants, or a decent cup of coffee. Connecting people to their work doesn't mean you need to window-dress the nature of your work. It is fine to do something mundane and profitable. If you can use technology to do it efficiently while providing a humane and respectful environment for people to work, a place where their contributions are recognized and valued, then you will have done more than enough for the world. And more importantly, for your people.