

WHAT DOES WORK MEAN 2025 AND BEYOND?

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BACKGROUND: VISIONS OF THE FUTURE OF WORK

There are multiple visions of the future of work. Indeed, there are as many visions as there are commentators. Despite this diversity, however, a similar narrative structure can be identified across nearly all of the contrasting visions. To understand the nature of this storyline, consider the following popular visions of the future of work:

- Products and services will be increasingly produced and delivered by people in formal jobs meaning that informal work (e.g., subsistence production, unpaid exchange) will disappear almost entirely from the economic landscape (the 'formalization' of work thesis);
- Capitalism will spread its tentacles ever wider and deeper to colonize the few remaining vestiges of the world that remain untouched by its grip (i.e., variously called the 'commodification', 'marketization' or 'commercialization' thesis);
- An open world economy is emerging with businesses increasingly operating in a de-regulated seamless global market-place (i.e., the 'globalization' thesis) as regulated national-level economies disappear;
- Industrial society will be replaced by post-industrial societies (i.e., the 'post-industrialism' thesis);
- Post-Fordist flexible work practices will increasingly replace Fordist mass production (i.e., the 'post-Fordism' thesis); and
- Post-bureaucratic work organization will steadily replace bureaucratic work organization (i.e., the 'post-bureaucracy' thesis).

In constructing each and every one of these visions, the first step is that all work is marshalled into one side or the other of some dichotomy which is deemed crucial for understanding the future (e.g., informal/formal work; non-commodified/commodified work; bureaucracy/post-bureaucracy; Fordism/post-Fordism). Second, and having squeezed all work into one side or the other of this dualism, the two sides are then ordered into a temporal and normative sequence in which one side is seen as universally replacing and/or more progressive than the other. Third and finally, and to represent this one-dimensional linear vision of the future, some label is created which usually involves using some '-ation' (e.g., formalization, globalization, commodification), '-ism' (e.g., post-industrialism, informationalism) or 'post-something-or-other' (e.g., post-capitalism, post-Fordism, post-bureaucracy). This narrative structure, as will now be shown, is a popular and powerful device. It is used in most of the best-selling 'pop-futurism' written by seer-like management gurus and also much of the serious academic writing.

Dominant visions of the future of work

Three grand narratives (often treated as 'facts') hold considerable sway over how the future of work is envisaged. To depict how the configuration of economies is changing, commentators commonly differentiate three modes of delivering goods and services, namely the 'market' (private sector), the 'state' (public sector) and the 'social' or informal economy.

Viewed in these terms, the current widespread consensus is that most nations are witnessing a common trajectory of work. Firstly, the future of work is popularly seen to involve an on-going 'formalization' of work in the sense that goods and services are increasingly produced and delivered through the formal (market and state) sphere under

the social relations of formal employment rather than through the informal sphere (termed the 'formalization' thesis). Secondly, this formal production and delivery of goods and services is depicted as increasingly occurring through the market sector (rather than by the state or informal sphere) by capitalist firms for the purpose of profit; in other words, there is what is variously called a 'commodification', 'commercialization' or 'marketization' of economic activity. Third and finally, this formalization and commodification of work is seen to be increasingly taking place with an open de-regulated world economy (i.e., the globalization thesis).

Alternative visions of the future of work

Alternative visions reject either descriptively or prescriptively these meta-narratives of formalization, commodification and globalization and depict different futures for work organization (see Table 1). These alternative visions contest the dominant narratives by inverting either the temporal and/or normative sequencing of formalization, commodification or globalization. That is, they either propound that there is a process of informalization, de-commodification or localization, or suggest prescriptively that progress or advancement lies not in formalization, commodification or globalisation but rather, in a process of informalization, de-commodification or localization.

Table 1 Dominant and alternative visions of the future of work

Dominant visions	Alternative visions
Formalization	Informalization of welfare: third way visions of work: post-employment visions
Commodification	De-commodification of employment: non-capitalist visions of work: post-capitalist visions of work
Globalization	Localization Of work and welfare: green visions

What is perhaps valuable about these alternative post-employment, post-capitalist and localist visions of the future of work is that they open up possible futures for work beyond formalization, commodification and globalization. Perhaps less convincing, however, is that they often simply invert the normative judgements of the formalization, commodification and globalization theses. Rather than attach positive attributes to formalization, commodification and globalization, and negative attributes to informalization, de-commodification and localization, they simply do the reverse. The result is that just as the dominant narratives over-romanticize formalization and so forth, these futurists do the same with informalization, de-commodification and localization. Ultimately, therefore, such commentaries simply continue with the same mode of thought as the dominant narratives by constructing a dichotomy which envisages or prescribes an either/or choice and then concocts this in a temporal manner as a one-dimensional linear transformation from some 'old' to 'new' form of work organization.

Futures for employment

It is not just these three grand narratives and their counter-visions, however, that conflate present-day differences across space, sectors and occupations into some temporal

sequence where one side of the coin is viewed as being supplanted by the other side of the coin. There are also a host of visions of the future of employment (which by definition are grounded in a vision of formalization) that similarly delineate some dualism and then depict a linear progression from one side of the binary to the other over time.

As Table 2 displays, these visions are of three broad types. First of all, there are those that represent the future of work organization primarily in terms of a shift from an industrial society to a post-industrial, information or knowledge economy. Secondly, there are those depicting the future of work in terms of a shift in employment practices from Fordist to post-Fordist practices and third and finally, those portraying the shift in work organization as being from bureaucracy to post-bureaucracy, or what is sometimes referred to as from direct to indirect control, compliance to commitment, hard to soft human resource management, or industrial relations to human resource management.

Table 2 Dichotomous visions of futures for employment

Nature of change	Old	New
Sector-based	Industrial society	Post-industrial Knowledge economy Information economy
Employment Practices	Fordism	Post-Fordism
Organizational	Bureaucracy Compliance Direct control Hard human resource management	Post-bureaucracy Commitment Indirect control Soft human resource management

All of these visions of the future of employment, however, conflate present-day differences across space, sectors and populations into a temporal sequence, in which one side of the coin is viewed as being supplanted by the other side of the coin. Moreover, foregrounding one of these dualisms and obfuscating the others from view fails to grasp the array of continuities and changes in the world of work.

For a fuller understanding of work beyond 2025, therefore, the changes cannot be configured in some one-dimensional linear manner as being towards some singular -ism, -ation or post-something-or-other. Instead, multiple changes are taking place. Although in some places, sectors, occupations and population groups, shifts towards formalization, commodification, globalization, information society, post-Fordism, post-bureaucracy and non-capitalist employment practices can be identified, once the lens is widened and other places, sectors, occupations and population groups analysed, shifts in the opposite direction can be marked out. This notion that there is no one evident future but various futures for work depending on where one looks might not seem so radical and clear-cut as the one-dimensional universal stories of management gurus, it is perhaps more accurate. Importantly, it also opens up the future. There are no preordained linear trajectories, no unstoppable forces and no inevitable tendencies (e.g., formalisation, commodification, globalization) but instead, heterogeneous paths with various fragments in the picture moving in different directions.

KEY ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE NATURE, ROLE AND ORGANISATION OF EDUCATION

Until now, most investigations of the future of work have focused upon some specific dualism (e.g., bureaucracy/post-bureaucracy; formal/informal; market/non-market) and sought to either chart the shift from one side of the dichotomy to the other or in more refined versions the variable shifts taking place across different places, sectors, occupations and populations. So far, however, the findings of these separate literatures have been seldom, if ever, synthesised to produce a more kaleidoscopic understanding of the future of work. A synthesis 'atlas' that maps the contrasting trends across population groups, places, sectors and occupations is therefore a necessary first step.

Having produced this atlas, the second step will be to evaluate the implications for the nature, role and organisation of education. Here, several questions will need to be addressed. Is and should education be purely about providing the population with a skill-set so as to enable them to engage in whatever types of formal employment will exist in 2025 and beyond? Or is and should education be about more than that? If so, what is/should be its role? And are the skill-sets required to meet the needs of formal employment in the future the same as those required to meet these wider objectives? If they differ, how do they vary?

Given that a significant proportion of work in the future is likely to take place within the formal economy, then a key role for education so far as the 'economy' is concerned will be to identify and provide the skill-sets required by the array of private, public and third sector organisations that constitute this formal economy. There is little doubt, therefore, that a systematic review of the range of skills required by the formal labour force in 2025 and beyond, in consequence, needs to be at the core of any consideration of the future role, nature and organisation of education.

This, however, is not the only issue that needs to be considered when discussing the relationship between education and work in the future. Given that as much time is currently spent in unpaid work as in paid work, and that if anything, the time spent in unpaid work is growing relative to paid work, serious consideration needs to be given to how education needs to be re-organised to reflect this ongoing tendency. Tailoring education to work, it seems, is not only about tailoring it to meet the needs of the formal labour force. It is also about ensuring that future generations can engage in a whole array of unpaid self-provisioning, reciprocal exchange and subsistence work and that these skills are passed on from one generation to the next.

A growing fear, nevertheless, is that many of these 'life' or 'subsistence' skills are starting to be lost. This needs to be evaluated. Has there been a demise of the ability of younger generations to engage in practical 'life' skills, such as cooking, wiring an electric plug, understanding the basics of food hygiene, sewing on a button, ironing, using an oven and household cleaning? If so, which manual skills are increasingly lacking and amongst which groups? And what about cognitive skills, moreover, such as making a shopping list, understanding food labels and laundry labels, planning the nutritional content of meals, making a daily job list and budgeting? Are these also in demise and amongst which groups? And what are the implications for the nature, role and organisation of education? How many lack these skills? Where do people currently learn such skills? And where should such education take place? What, for example, is the role of formal and informal learning in delivering these life skills? And what are the diverse roles that technology can play in facilitating such cognitive, manual and social skills (e.g., text-messaging from teachers to remind children of homework deadlines).

The acquisition and up-dating of such self-provisioning skills is also important in the context of the emerging debates about the need to respond to climate change and reduce our carbon footprints. Analysing the environmental 'three Rs' (i.e., recycle, reuse and repair), none can be conducted unless individuals are in possession of a broad and diverse set of manual, cognitive and social skill-sets. Acquiring and up-dating such skills will therefore need to be a key facet of education in 2025 and beyond.

Education, however, is not simply passive and responsive to the forces that surround it. Education can also actively construct and drive futures. Educating the population about climate change and encouraging practical responses is one example of how education can play an active role in opening up the future and demonstrating new possibilities. Identifying other issues where education can be used as a driver of change might be a useful way forward.

Finally, any discussion of the future relationship between work and education needs to consider the changing importance and meaning of work in contemporary society. Whether formal employment will remain the prime source through which people seek identity and meaning in the future is a crucial question. So too is it important to understand whether other forms of work beyond formal employment, such as subsistence work (e.g., recycling, reuse and repair), will or should become re-valued in the future and the role of education in that process. It is also important to contemplate the degree to which consumption is replacing work as the chief source through which people seek identity and meaning in their lives? If this trend continues, what implications does this have for the nature, role and organisation of education?

METHODS

Until now, there has been a good deal of empirical research that focuses upon specific dichotomies and either charts the shift from one side of the dichotomy to the other or in more refined versions deciphers the variable shifts taking place across different places, sectors, occupations and populations. There are, for example, voluminous literatures on the variable shift from bureaucratic to post-bureaucratic work organisation, the advent of knowledge or information societies, post-Fordist work practices, formalisation, marketization and economic globalisation. The problem, however, is that these literatures currently exist as islands and inhabitants of one island seldom if ever set out on voyages to discover these other islands. The result is that no attempt has been made to synthesise these literatures so as to produce an atlas of the trajectories of work. A first step, therefore, is to conduct desk-based research to produce such an atlas on the variable futures for work across different population groups, places, sectors and/or occupations.

Having produced this atlas of the emerging nature of work organisation, the second step will be to evaluate the implications of these trajectories for the nature, role and organisation of education. A barrage of techniques could be used to do this and in major part, this could be left to tenderers to decide. What is essential is that when considering the future relationship between education and work, the full range of issues discussed above will need to be investigated.

DISCIPLINARY COLLABORATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS, RESEARCH CENTRES AND INSTITUTIONS WHO MIGHT BE INVOLVED

The above research is by definition multi- and inter-disciplinary. Given the broad span of expertise required, there are perhaps two key research centres that instantly spring to mind with the capability and capacity to evaluate the breadth of issues discussed above, namely the:

- New Economics Foundation; and
- Forum for the Future.

Besides these two research centres, a host of other individuals could make a key contribution to specific facets of this research challenge. These include in no particular order:

- Prof Danny Burns, Social and Organisational Learning as Action Research (SOLAR), University of the West of England
- Prof Marilyn Taylor, University of the West of England

- Dr Gill Seyfang, ESRC Fellow in Low-Carbon Lifestyles, Centre for Social and Economic Research on the Global Environment (CSERGE), University of East Anglia – relationship between work, education and sustainability
- Dr Sally Hibbert, Marketing Group, Nottingham University Business School – market analysis of depletion of 'life skills'
- Dr Suzanne Horne, Department of Marketing, University of Stirling – market analysis of depletion of 'life skills'
- Dr Tim Cooper, Centre for Sustainable Consumption, Sheffield Hallam University – sustainable consumption

POSTSCRIPT

There is no intent that the above should be viewed as an autonomous 'research challenge' to be adopted as one of the five challenge areas. Rather, the intent is that the issues raised in this challenge paper will be recognised as important and integrated with the issues raised in other challenge papers to help produce the five challenge areas for future research. As such, little attention has been here paid to the requests for detail on methods and breakdown of tasks, timeline and costs.

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