

Mitigating Technological Unemployment with Shared Work

The coming automation

Technology is moving faster than ever and as it has always been in the past with new technologies some jobs will disappear and others will be created. But this time, for an important body of analysts, it will be different. The simple speed and magnitude at which changes are and will continue to happen are alone enough to conclude that this revolution is like no other and that it will leave a lot of people unemployed in the coming years.

The technological unemployment we are facing is coming in two shapes. The first one is tied to automation. Robots and automated factory floor are not new, but they were “simple”. We automated what we could at the time, that is, very repetitive tasks. Automakers, to name just them, created astonishing robotic ballets in their factories. Robots weren’t smart but for any repeatable task that needed strength or precision they could be implemented.

But today, paired with AI, it’s a whole new revolution. In these new robotised shops, robots build consumer electronics, they prepare orders in warehouses and produce hydroponic green all by themselves. Better yet, they can now drive cars and trucks, but the AI’s arrival won’t only change the automation capacities we have; it will also challenge cognitive jobs.

On the second front, we now have "chatbots" that can answer most of the questions they get. Loan officers are being replaced as we speak with simple web based software. In fact, with AI, any job based on data that can be boiled down to binary answer is at risk.

Furthermore, we now have AIs that can write article or replace teacher’s aide without anybody noticing. We have software that can supplant most discovery lawyers. In healthcare where the applications of AI are limitless, IBM has been testing pattern recognition software to help x-ray specialists but the software is getting so good that these specialists might very well be out of job in a few years. This technology is moving so fast that even expert have trouble following!

Technological unemployment

In theory this declared technological unemployment, this global jobs diminution shouldn't be regarded as a problem, it should be celebrated as we might finally be approaching the long predicted leisure society that Keynes had foreseen in 1928. But nobody seems to be celebrating.

Currently, in fact, the prevailing understanding of the situation is that technological unemployment is going to create a great social division between those who have jobs and those who don't, which is a simple extension of the current division between the global high wage, high-tech jobs and the local low wage service jobs.

This outlook on the situation is one of the reasons for the regain interest in basic income as many think that universal basic income is one of the most viable, elegant and humane solution to this problem.

I, for one, do think that basic income has a major role to play in alleviating the effects of technological unemployment. I am also convinced that we don't need to work 40 hours a week to live a decent life, but I nevertheless think that we still need to work, albeit for a shorter share of our time. The fact is that we need to feel useful, to feel that we are participating, we need to feel that we are contributing to society.

I am also an advocate of volunteering and having done a lot myself, I am well aware of the rewards it can provide. If a basic income were to be deployed I would be the first one to cut my hours at work and give some time back to the community. But volunteering is not for everybody just as programming isn't for everybody either.

So even though basic income can have a huge effect in alleviating the repercussion of mass unemployment and that it can certainly suffice some part of the population that would embrace volunteering as an occupation, the fact is that for a large part of the population work is something we need to take part in and so, basic income simply won't be enough.

Besides, to be fair and realistic, we also need to recognise that a good part of the population will want more than the basic income and that society needs to have a way of providing them with job opportunities.

In other words, we will need to share jobs if we want to create a world where everybody that wants to work can do so.

Shared work

There are already numerous shared jobs schemes deployed today. But most of them are simple part time arrangements. Permitting or instating part time work in a huge plant is not shared work per se; it's just going forward in the division of labour or permitting flexible hours. The same applies for teachers or nurses. In most countries, first grade school teachers teach everything except music and phys ed., we could easily have them teach only the basics and leave science, history and geography to other teaches. It would be closer to job sharing but still mostly a division of the labour into smaller chunks.

This kind of job sharing, the labour division extension, is very important and should be encouraged as it is indeed the first step towards real job sharing and will also have an important role to play in work distribution.

Real shared jobs appear mostly in the context of small and medium size businesses. They are the ones managers generally don't want to hear about, they are the ones where two persons share a single position in a business. We know that we need to share jobs, but we also know that management probably won't embrace the idea as they'll feel it will be at a higher cost for them and surely think that it will be a lower efficiency arrangement.

The first part of the answer to the management comes from studies done on shorter workweek. It has been demonstrated numerous times that people working less hours in a week will be

more efficient, be more creative, lose less time on the job and most importantly be sick a lot less. So in fact, simply having employees work less can be very positive for businesses.

How about two people sharing one job? Unfortunately this is where the studies end, there are no serious studies on the subject. But if we simply think about it, we find that there are a lot of advantages. After all, don't we say that two heads are better than one?

As a matter of fact, it is in this old proverb that we can find the first obvious advantage; two persons working on the same job will bring twice the solutions, the ideas and the creativity to push the business forward. And this is far from being a marginal gain since a major part of future jobs will be creativity intensive. Bringing new ideas and solutions to the table will be crucial to the success of businesses. And, as ideas are exchanged new ones will emerge, so in fact, sharing jobs is not a $1 + 1 = 2$ situation, it's a $1 + 1 = 3$ situation.

Then, two rested persons will work better and be less prone to sickness than one overworked individual. Vacations will also be much easier to organize and unlike a one person job holding, when a vacation does arise the whole job will be done by a person who actually knows what he or she's doing, which is again a huge benefit for the business.

Those were mostly obvious advantages of job sharing. But the main counter argument to job sharing is probably the presumed loss of efficiency due to having two persons sitting in one chair.

Let's start by re-stating that there will be an efficiency gain since the two co-workers will always be well rested and that they will share ideas. They will rarely be on sick leave and have much more solutions available to their daily problems. Will this be enough to convince everybody? It's difficult to say. But it might not in the eye of those who will be asked to pay and manage two persons instead of one and who might think that those two employees will be as disorganised as anybody else in the office.

This is where the managers are making a big mistake. Having two persons working on a single position will force them to organise themselves more. And this is the absolute base of efficiency, having the right information at the right time, being organised, listing tasks, listing steps in those tasks, knowing exactly what to do next, this is how high efficiency people work and this is how two persons sharing a position will have to work.

When working alone, people tend to rely a lot on their memory, they know the basics and they know their job, so they won't take that many notes. The task list is in their head and they know what to do next. But priorities change, human memory is unreliable and juggling many tasks in parallel demand constant focus so even the most organised employees sometimes lose track and become inefficient.

Sharing work will necessitate higher organisation from the co-workers and this is just what the management wants, so there is no reason to push shared work aside, because higher

organisation is not only what the management wants but it's also what co-workers want from each other. High efficiency co-working will be just like coming back to work and finding the notes that you left yourself before the weekend and being fresh to get the work done.

In fact, this type of shared work can easily be compared to having shifts on a machine. A lot of industries work on shifts to maximize high cost equipment. Shared work is all the same, except that what is being maximized in this case is our wellbeing – and our job!

Shared work is sharing a single position between two or three people. Its shorter hours at the office and more free time. It's well rested employees that are more focused, more creative and less absence due to sickness. It's a creative team on every position coming with new ideas and solutions, sharing and completing them. Its zero down time and much simpler ways to organise vacations.

And, most of all, it's a much more organised position filled by two or three persons that work together in a high efficiency mode. As for the fact that it might be a little more expensive to have two or three persons on a single job, this is something that can be addressed by governments either by reducing social charge per employee or by putting forward subsidies to encourage the development of shared work – as those will certainly be less expensive than having masses of unemployed citizens.

Conclusion

I'll conclude by first stating the obvious: Technological unemployment is at our doors. Basic income is part of the solution but, in my opinion, it can't be the only solution. Most of us need to work. We need to feel useful and thus we need a model that permits work for those who want to work. Shared work in its many different schemes is then the obvious solution. Its advantages are numerous; rested workers, more creative workers and high efficiency positions.

Shared work won't solve everything, but it has to be part of the new paradigm, it's clear that it's not for everybody or even every line of work - at least for now. Low income jobs holders might not be inclined to split their pay, but unfortunately those are the jobs that will be automated first. Without a basic income shared work would only be of interest for the higher part of the middle class as low wage workers won't have any leverage to negotiate a reasonable pay.

On the other hand, basic income without shared work cannot guarantee jobs for everyone who wishes to work. We need to have options for everybody to feel that they can participate, that they can be part of the society.

All we have to do now is test the idea and ask for formal laws permitting shared work to be instigated. Shared work, just like basic income won't materialize out of goodwill, we'll need to ask for it. So in the context of the coming technological unemployment, let's propose a complete project and have shared work and basic income tied together as they need to be.