

Knowledge Worker

Work is Disappearing

(February 2017)

“What are we going to do with all those people?”

Back in the early 1980s, I was leading a team that was working in support of Booz Allen’s installation of a new, automated claims processing system at one of the Blue Cross/Blue Shield plans. My team’s task was to develop and deliver training that would support the rollout of the new system. Along the way, we had occasion to work with and examine the work of the claims examiners. Much of what we found in their work was expressible in algorithmic form. We did so and it was promptly incorporated into computer processing routines. We saw immediately that computers were going to replace large numbers of people and one of the Booz Allen consultants raised the obvious question: “What are we going to do with all those people?” He was referring, of course, to the army of workers who would be displaced by computers.

Since then, I’ve done a lot more work of a similar kind, devising algorithms that expressed the tasks of claims examiners, underwriters, financial aid assistants and the like. In one case, a large seasonal workforce completely disappeared, its work swallowed up by the computer. Recently, I noted that loan officers, whose work is also of an algorithmic nature, are likely to become targets soon – if they haven’t already. Automation and mechanization have displaced vast numbers of workers. Robots, especially the kind that can do that human-like combination of manual and information-processing work are likely to replace even more. By some accounts, truck drivers will be replaced by self-driving trucks in a few years.

Some General Implications of the Disappearance of Work

A great deal of the work people currently do is disappearing, handed off to machines, computers and robots. There is more for workers to fear from that than from work being outsourced or shipped offshore. In addition, there is no clear sign or compelling evidence that an adequate amount of new work offering new jobs for people to do will appear any time soon – nor later on. When work disappears, it takes with it the ability to earn a living. We are faced with what could prove to be staggering increases in the number of unemployed and unemployables. As my Booz Allen colleague said some 35 years ago, “What are we going to do with all those people?”

The disappearance of work for people to do has enormous social, political and economic implications. I am just beginning to wrap my head around them and I will be the first to admit that I don’t have a clue regarding any ready or easy solutions. I can, however, envision numerous dark and foreboding scenarios, some marked by social unrest, perhaps large-scale violence and all marked by desperation, the absence of hope and woefully inadequate responses of government, politicians and the rich and powerful.

Implications for Human Performance Improvement Professionals

The disappearance of work for people to do also has enormous implications for those who consider themselves human performance improvement professionals. In one sense, it signals a drastically shrinking market. In another, it signals a need to shift our focus from the performance of people to the performance of computers, machines, processes and, yes, even those pesky robots. But how to do that? We are not, I don’t think, expert programmers, robotics engineers, or even primarily business process professionals. Our work is also in danger of disappearing; indeed, I think much of it already has.

As I wrote in last month’s column, one avenue open to us is to refocus our efforts on helping people learn to manage and improve their own performance, what I called “DIY PI” or “Do It Yourself Performance

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Improvement.” Although that option might prove useful with the work that remains, it is no cure for disappearing work – theirs and ours.

To be sure, a great deal of work will continue to exist, and I suspect we will see the emergence of some new jobs but not nearly enough to employ the displaced. I also think there will be a viable market for the services of human performance improvement professionals, but I suspect it will be a greatly reduced market and a greatly reduced population of performance improvement specialists. ISPI and its members are confronted by the fact that work is disappearing and along with it the need and the market for its technology and its technologists. To paraphrase my Booz Allen colleague, *“What are we going to do with our technology and its technologists?”*

Note

For a thorough and balanced look at “A World Without Work” see Derek Thompson’s article bearing that title in the July/August 2015 issue of *The Atlantic*. One of Thompson’s more trenchant observations concerns a comment Henry Ford II, then CEO of Ford Motor Company, made to Walter Reuther, head of the United Auto Workers union, during a 1950s tour of an engine factory in Cleveland, Ohio. Henry gestured toward the machines making the engines and said, “Walter, how are you going to get those robots to pay union dues?” Reuther replied, “Henry, how are you going to get them to buy your cars?” Thompson’s article is available on the web at:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/07/world-without-work/395294/>

About the Author

Fred Nickols, CPT, is a knowledge worker, a writer, consultant and former executive who spent 20 years in the United States Navy, retiring as a decorated chief petty officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the managing partner of [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His website is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Workers’ Tool Room](#) and more than 200 free articles, book chapters, and papers. Fred is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceXpress*.