Why Do We Work?

Is it time yet to divorce productivity from employment?

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We should do away with the absolutely specious notion that everybody has to earn a living. It is a fact today that one in ten thousand of us can make a technological breakthrough capable of supporting all the rest. The youth of today are absolutely right in recognizing this nonsense of earning a living. We keep inventing jobs because of this false idea that everybody has to be employed at some kind of drudgery because, according to Malthusian Darwinian theory he must justify his right to exist. So we have inspectors of inspectors and people making instruments for inspectors to inspect inspectors.
The true business of people should be to go back to school and think about whatever it was they were thinking about before somebody came along and told them they had to earn a living.
— Buckminster Fuller, 1981.

This is one of my all-time favourite quotes by one of my all-time favourite humans. Bucky Fuller was the definition of a polymath, and notorious for a slew of really good and really controversial ideas across many different fields. His recipe for coming up with ideas that were both good and controversial was actually quite simple:

1. Find a problem, by constantly questioning the norm (in the example above, the idea that everyone needs to work for their livelihood).
2. Employ an infinite "system boundary" across space and time (case in point: when you realize that at any given point there's a smoke stack spewing large quantities of sulphur into the air while production facilities are mining an equal amount of sulfur from the ground, pollution starts looking more like a problem of resource allocation… but only if you employ a long-term and Whole Earth mindset).
3. Design a solution.

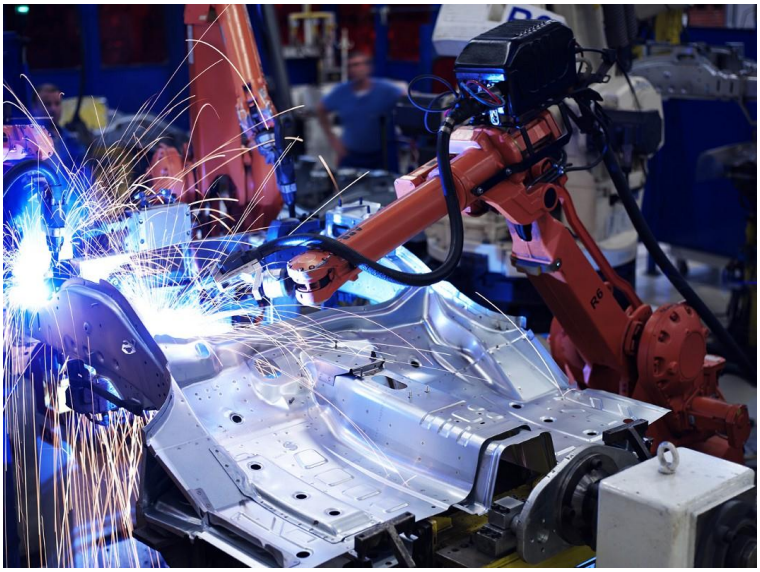
Computers became prominent in the final stages of his life, and he was excited about their potential to change life as we know it for the better, as the passage above reflects. He coined the term *ephemeralization* to describe the notion that over time, the cost of producing anything approaches zero while its quality continues to increase… until eventually, we can do everything, with nothing (nowadays, "The Singularity" is a more common descriptor). The debate around the potential positive/negative societal implications of a singularity or any drastic technological advancement is a not an old one, but it's a good one worth re-visiting right in 2013. I'd like to weigh in on my observations of recent social & technological trends and the implications for employment when everyone in the world has the internet in their pocket.

Let's start with a definition of wealth that makes no mention of money:

Wealth is our organized capability to cope effectively with the environment, and sustain our (physical, mental, and spiritual) well-being for the forward days of our lives.

This is a loose definition that recognizes contributions along every level of Maslow's Hierarchy (both carpenters & poets have the capacity to generate wealth). Assuming that as a society and as individuals, we strive for wealth through "work", there are two opposing forces at play that relate back to ephemeralization. One force drives down short-term employment rate and the other may drive it upwards. Each are net-positive when you employ a long-term and whole earth mindset. First:

Technology automates (and scales) wealth creation.

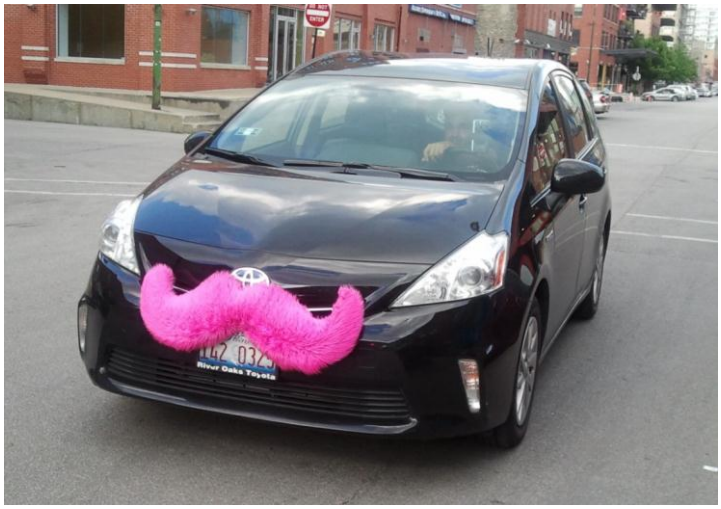


ATMs, robotic assembly lines, and self-driving cars automate. Calculators, mechanical looms, and Khan Academy add scale to human effort. This is obviously not a new phenomenon. It has long been responsible for drawing concern from people whose jobs risk being automated, like 19th century textile artisans in England and Will Smith in *I, Robot*. These are understandable reactions, given that we still couple employment with livelihood—but let's take a step back to observe the big picture.

To an alien in a spaceship orbiting Earth, this would seem very strange. Strange, because the alien is assessing the situation with a Whole Earth mindset. Automated wealth creation is good, right? It means more opportunity for individuals to pursue art, hobbies, or create different kinds of wealth in ways that we cannot yet automate. Obviously however, there are short term and local negative consequences. There are 3.5 million truck drivers in the USA alone,representing only one small group of workers at risk of losing their jobs to a high-profile form of automation in the near future. The alien's view here sounds idealistic, but maybe bridging the gap between idealism and pragmatism only requires taking a longer view.

There have been many ideas on how to solve the livelihood problem that I won't dwell on here. A proposal for 21 hour work weeks recently made its way around the internet. John Maynard Keynes famously predicted that by 2030, leisure would replace work as our default activity and created a robust economic & social theory to support this claim. Unemployment rates have in fact climbed steadily since his prediction 83 years ago, although we generally don't consider this a positive trend. Instead of debating the merits & consequences of socialism I want to touch upon on the second technological force at play opposing the trend of losing jobs to automation.

Technology lowers the barrier for individuals to create wealth.



A Lyft driver & his car

This is a newer trend, but one whose scope is also increasing. We all know that any kid with a computer and a garage can learn how to code and create the next great thing on the internet, but what about the real world? Software eating the world does not only provide opportunity to those who code.

In San Francisco, anyone with a car and some free time can throw a giant pink mustache on their grille and drive strangers around the city for fun and profit.

You can become a personal shopper with Instacart or a virtual assistant with Fancy hands. You can rent out your couch on Airbnb or a parked car at the airport on Flightcar. People with specific skills can find work on 99 Designs,oDesk, and Mechanical Turk. Each of these scenarios creates wealth.

Many of these services are not widespread outside of the Bay Area, but could be leading indicators as to where labour markets are headed. These systems have re-shaped the standard system of employment and wealth creation. Since most of them rely on everyone carrying around the internet & GPS, we are just getting started… but here are some interesting trends:

1. People can work on their own schedules, and on their own terms. I've met Lyft drivers who drive for a few hours every weekend to cover their car lease and others who work "full-time".
2. Marketplaces like Lyft & Instacart are getting more efficient, because they can dynamically adjust supply to match demand. Systems get smarter over time by learning when people need groceries and transportation and can also call on more workers (perhaps at higher compensation) when demand increases.
3. It's easier to get paid for goods and services (the "cost of selling" approaches zero). Workers can "punch in and out" digitally while consumers can pay with the tap of a screen. Services like Gumroad,Square, and Shopify make it simple to sell anything—from t-shirts to unused Photoshop files. In Kuwait, people are selling all kinds of things using Instagram for distribution and WhatsApp for fulfillment.

"If you have an Instagram account, you can slap a price tag on anything, take a picture of it, and sell it. For instance, you could take this can of San Pellegrino, paint it pink, put a heart on it, call it yours, and declare it for sale. Even my grandmother has an Instagram business! She sells dried fruit. A friend's cousin is selling weird potted plants that use Astroturf. People are creating, you know, hacked products."

Overall, lowering the barrier to entry to creating wealth is a valuable trend. We also may be doing a really bad job right now at measuring the impact of this trend with traditional performance indicators like GDP and employment rate.

What's next?

We need to listen to these two trends and make them work for us both collectively and as individuals.

1. We should recognize "good" job loss from automation.

The prevalence of cigarettes for past generations seems crazy now that we understand their danger. Similarly, future generations will look back at us with surprise and horror to learn that we manually drove ourselves around in a glass bubble at breakneck speeds every day and thought nothing of it. Forty thousand people are unnecessarily killed in the US alone every year due to car accidents—we should acknowledge the automation of dangerous jobs as a valuable pattern. We do this already in some situations, like the robots who eat land mines for breakfast, but we should probably widen the scope of what we consider dangerous.

2. We should expand our definition and ease of employment

The skills marketplace will become more efficient, making it easier to connect people with specific expertise to real opportunity for wealth creation. Why wait for some arbitrary point in your education (like obtaining a bachelors degree) before entering the workplace as a skilled worker? An ambitious first-year graphic design student in Brazil is easily qualified to make a logo for a mom-and-pop shop in Portugal and we should encourage this type of work. When everyone has the internet in their pocket, the ease of providing a valuable service and getting compensated for that service trends to zero. Enterprising kids will no longer have real-world and local constraints. Their total addressable market is not the number of lawns that need mowing on their street.

3. We should change how we measure productivity & wealth

Instead of measuring employment as a binary value, it would be an interesting exercise to try and map wealth creation to everyone's day-to-day activities. We would probably be surprised at how little wealth is created on average, by people who are employed. David Graeber's recent piece (*On The Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs*) is a fantastic read that explores this in more detail. We need better ways to recognize and reward real wealth-creation, foster good automation, and track the gap in supply for the jobs we *should* be focused on.

My conclusion:

Automation will become more readily seen as a good trend when we take a broader view and have better ways to measure and recognize its benefits. Meanwhile, a lower barrier to entry for creating wealth should counteract the negative short-term implications of losing jobs to technology.

Both trends are good for the world, and may help us eventually even rethink "employment as a virtue" and how we choose to spend our days.

Thanks to Spencer Thompson, Alexandra Kim, and Hans Vermeulen for reading drafts of this.