

REPORT | 22 Mar 2019

The four futures of work: coping with uncertainty in an age of radical technologies

EMPLOYMENT

☆ SAVE TO MY RSA



Four Futures of Work, from the RSA Future Work Centre, which follows RSA chief executive Matthew Taylor's employment review for the Prime Minister, argues that policy-makers should focus more on how automation will transform all work, not just lead to job losses.

Rising inequality, growing suppression in the workplace, stagnant wages, heightened discrimination and bias, and deepening geographic division could all have a bigger impact than simple job losses to robots

Based on detailed 'scenario modelling' with leading engineers Arup, the study details four very different 'scenarios' for the future of work in the UK:

- **The Big Tech Economy describes a world where most technologies develop at a rapid pace, from self-driving cars to 3D printing.** A new machine age delivers significant improvements in the quality of products and public services, with the cost of everyday goods including transport and energy plummeting. However, unemployment and economic insecurity creep upwards, and the spoils of growth are offshored and concentrated in a handful of US and Chinese tech behemoths. The dizzying pace of change leaves workers and unions with little time to respond.
- **The Precision Economy portrays a future of hyper-surveillance.** Technological progress is moderate, but a proliferation of sensors allows firms to create value by capturing and analysing more information on objects, people and the environment. Gig platforms take on more prominence and rating systems become pervasive in the workplace. While some lament these trends as invasive, others believe they have ushered in a more meritocratic society where effort is more generously rewarded. A hyper connected society also leads to wider positive spill overs, with less waste as fewer resources are left idle.
- **The Exodus Economy is characterised by an economic slowdown.** A crash on the scale of 2008 dries up funding for innovation and keeps the UK in a low-skilled, low-productivity and low-paid rut. Faced with another bout of austerity, workers lose faith in the ability of capitalism to improve their lives, and alternative economic models gather interest. Cooperatives and mutuals emerge in large numbers to serve people's core economic needs in food, energy and banking. While some workers struggle on poverty wages, others discover ways to live more self-sufficiently, including by moving away from urban areas.
- **The Empathy Economy envisages a future of responsible stewardship.** Technology advances at a clip, but so too does public awareness of its dangers. Tech companies self-regulate to stem concerns and work hand in hand with external stakeholders to create new products that work on everyone's terms. Automation takes place at a modest scale but is carefully managed in partnership with workers and unions. Disposable income flows into 'empathy sectors' like education, care and entertainment. This trend is broadly welcomed but brings with it a new challenge of emotional labour, where the need to be continuously expressive and available takes its toll.

- [Download the Four Futures of Work report \(PDF, 1.4MB\)](#)
- [Find out more about the RSA Future Work Centre](#)



DOWNLOAD REPORT

PDF 1.4 MB

Contributors



BENEDICT DELLOT
Former Head of the RSA Future Work Centre and Associate Director



FABIAN WALLACE-STEPHENS
Senior Researcher, Economy, Enterprise and Manufacturing



RICH MASON
Economy Team Assistant

Related reports



A blueprint for good work

09 Jun 2020

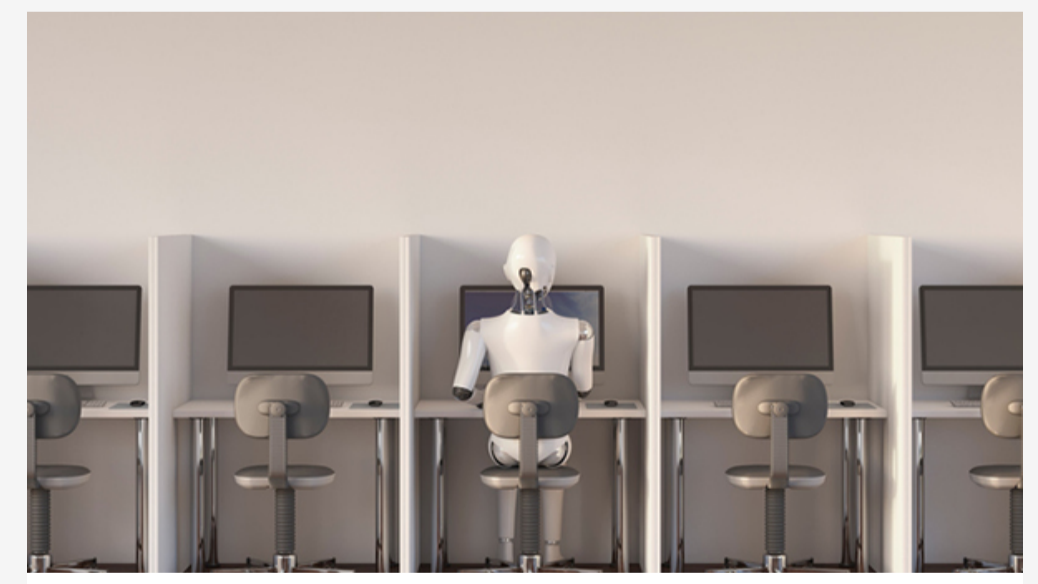
This report sets out eight ideas to form the basis for a new social contract for good work.



Retail therapy: towards a future of good work in retail

11 Sep 2019

This snapshot paper summarises our enquiry into the future of retail. We explore possible future challenges and opportunities for the sector and outline a set of prototype policy and practice interventions, developed in partnership with major retailers, policy makers and wider civil society.



Work in an age of radical technologies

23 Sep 2018

Benedict Dellot and Fabian Wallace-Stephens introduce the Future Work Centre with a glimpse into what the world of work might look like in the future

