ISSUE BRIEF

#1

Cluster 1: The role of work for individuals and society

Individuals, work and society

The establishment of the Global Commission on the Future of Work in August 2017 marked the start of the second phase of ILO's Future of Work Centenary initiative. The six thematic clusters provide a basis for further deliberations of the Global Commission. They focus on the main issues that need to be considered if the future of work is to be one that provides security, equality and prosperity. A series of Issue Briefs are prepared under each of the proposed clusters. These are intended to stimulate discussion on a select number of issues under the different themes. The thematic clusters are not necessarily related to the structure of the final report.

LIST OF ISSUE BRIEFS

Introduction

The idea of an "end to work" (Rifkin, 1995) has figured prominently in discussion of the future of work. But work remains a central pillar of our individual lives, our societies, and our politics.

The ILO Constitution addresses the social role of work, emphasizing that "all human beings, irrespective of race, creed or sex, have the right to pursue both their material well-being and their spiritual development in conditions of freedom and dignity, of economic security and equal opportunity" (Declaration of Philadelphia, Article II (a)). It is a formulation which captures the idea that work serves to meet material needs, but also has to do with the self-realization of the individual. To this may be added the role of work in connecting individuals to each other in cohesive societies: in Sigmund Freud's formulation, work provides "a secure place in a portion of human reality, in the human community" (Freud, 1930, p. 27).

A clear understanding of the role of work for the individual and society is the necessary starting point for consideration of the future of work we want. That understanding begins by recognizing that, for a large part of humanity, work remains a question of survival, the essential means of ensuring the very basics of existence, and then of lifting people out of poverty. Encouragingly, this is well reflected in the rationale and substantive content of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

From there, the conditions of work and its content become salient. A minimum requirement is that work should not kill you – although 2.78 million people die each year because of it – nor should it make you ill or disable you. Similarly, work should promote and not violate the labour and other human rights of those who perform it. If work is not simply to be endured as the price for meeting material need but to contribute to the self-realization of the individual, then its content and the way in which it is organized matter too. Purposeful activity is both the distinctive feature and a fundamental need of the human being. That is why access to meaningful work which offers a space for autonomy and creativity is so crucial, while monotonous, repetitive work and drudgery are obstacles to such fulfilment.

The individual's experience of work further depends on how it allows for connections to others – co-workers, employers, employees – and to society as a whole. The importance of such connection is most vividly illustrated by what happens when it is broken – that is, by the devastating psychosocial impact of unemployment. In fact, work provides a whole network of connections between the individual and society: the formal connections of law and contract; the personal and collaborative connections with those one interacts with at work; the associative and communal connections that are often generated by work; the material and reputational connections which define rank and status; and the connections which define work–life balances and imbalances.

Current focus on "inclusive" and "balanced" growth and development would seem to underline the inherent need of the individual to be a part of, and to contribute to, wider social processes and goals, to do so on terms considered fair and equitable, and to do so through working.

These considerations concerning the instrumental, social and purposive role of work for the individual and society have not changed over time and there is no obvious reason to think that they will change in the future. The question is rather how current processes of change can be shaped so that work is better able to fulfil this role; what opportunities do they bring, and what risks?

This Issue Brief considers how some of the changes are impacting on the temporal and spatial organization of work. When and where we perform our work are two of the most fundamental characteristics of work in general. Historical developments have already caused these dimensions of work to evolve. They are continuing to do so, with profound consequences for the individual and society. Subsequent Issue Briefs elaborate on a number of related questions that might warrant attention to allow us to prepare for and shape the future of work we want.

How is work changing, and what are the implications for the individual and society?

Historically, technological innovation has had a profound impact on workplaces and work schedules, i.e. the temporal and spatial dimensions of work. The first industrial revolution led to the concentration of industrial workers in large units and imposed rigid working time arrangements. The advent of electric light allowed those arrangements to extend beyond daylight hours, with significant implications for individuals and society. This led to new policies, such as on maximum working hours and night work by women.

So what might a fourth industrial revolution bring? The combination of technology and policy decisions in the last decades has already promoted the interdependence of economies and the rapid inclusion of many millions of people in a single global system of production and exchange. Through "time–space compression" (Gregory et al., 2009; Agnew, 2001), this has brought people closer together in their economic interactions, in which obstacles of distance and time seemingly dissolve and give way to the immediate and the virtual.[1]

Nevertheless, there is reason to suppose that the very process of this integration of production and services, at times on a global scale, can also lead to the disintegration or dispersal of the temporal and spatial organization of work, with important consequences for the individual and for society. For example, while more people are brought together in the same global production system, this has been accompanied by the vertical disintegration of enterprises as they concentrate on the most profitable core activities and outsource the rest (see Issue Brief No. 10). It has also been accompanied by the breaking up of single jobs into a series of discrete tasks.

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1 Jessop (2000) describes this time–space compression as involving "the intensification of 'discrete' events in real time and/or increased velocity of material and immaterial flows over a given distance. This is linked to changing material and social technologies enabling more precise control over ever-shorter periods of action as well as 'the conquest of space by time'" (p. 70).

Work and time

The ILO's very first Convention in 1919 was on working time and set out the goal of the eight-hour working day and the maximum 48-hour working week.[2] It was quickly followed by another Convention establishing the principle of the five-day working week with two consecutive days of rest.[3] They constitute a succinct statement of what 100 years ago was considered a socially desirable, and economically possible, organization of work. What would a corresponding statement look like today and what are the issues at stake?

A key set of issues addresses the reduction in working hours and the increased flexibility of working time.

The progressive reduction in working time is a long-standing social policy objective in its own right, made possible by improved productivity and living standards and made topical by the prospect of work scarcity foreseen by some future of work commentators. In practice, these reductions tend to be implemented as part of a package to meet the needs of enterprises for internal flexibility in the context of the 24-hour global economy, as well as those of workers to balance work and private life. They can be the subject of complex processes of negotiation and dialogue, as exemplified by the recent collective agreement in the German metal sector and the railways, where flexibility has been combined with the ability of workers to determine their own work–life balance by choosing to reduce their weekly working hours (for example, to 28 hours in the metal sector), and take additional annual leave.[4]

While increased working time flexibility is a response to enterprise needs and to workers' preferences, particularly in the search for better work–life balance, there is no guarantee that the two coincide, raising the concept of "time sovereignty": who ultimately decides and controls the use of time? Furthermore, the possibility to negotiate a reduction in working hours and working time flexibility is likely to be more limited in developing countries with weak collective bargaining institutions (Lee and McCann, 2011). The prevalence of informality and unpaid work in developing economies is also likely to preclude the choices that are increasingly on the horizon for workers in other parts of the world.

The context in which these debates take place is the very uneven distribution of working time: more than one-third of the global workforce work more than 48 hours a week and nearly one-fifth less than 35. For many in the informal economy in particular, worker preferences for more work are not realized, resulting in chronic time-related underemployment. But there is also evidence of extremely long weekly working hours in low-wage developing countries among both men and women (see figure 1). Women frequently bear the brunt of household and care work (see Issue Briefs Nos 3 and 4); when this is taken together with the uneven distribution of paid working time, the gender dimension of "time poverty" – the lack of desired free time – becomes evident.

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2 Hours of Work (Industry) Convention, 1919 (No. 1).

3 Weekly Rest (Industry) Convention, 1921 (No. 14).

4 See IG Metall's (2018) press release on the outcomes of the collective agreement signed on 5 February 2018, in force from 1 January 2018 to 31 March 2020.

Figure 1. Weekly hours of work by sex, 2016
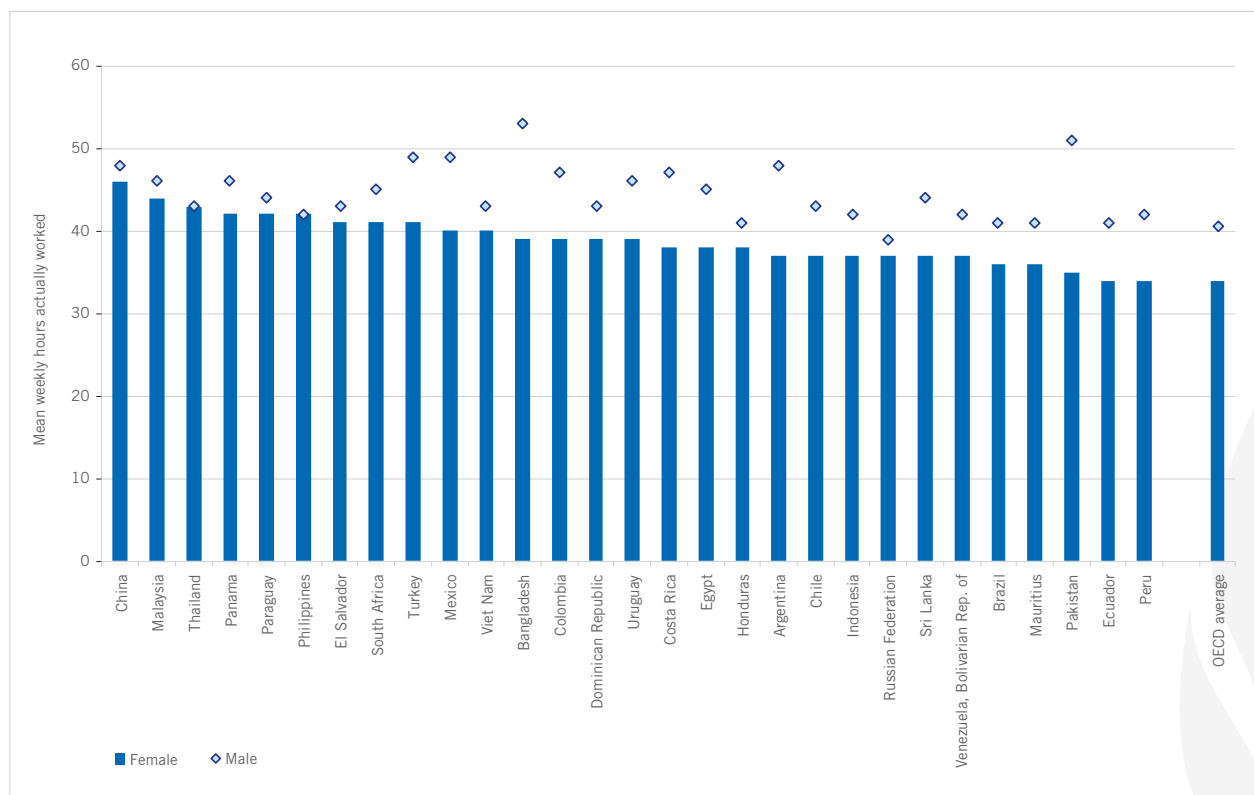
Source: ILOSTAT and OECD database.
Note: The mean number of hours of work per week refer to hours worked in all jobs of employed persons and in all types of working time arrangements (e.g. full time and part time).

The other key emerging issue is the blurring of the distinction between working time and free private time. Changes in work organization – homework, telework, the platform economy, self-employment and independent work – give greater scope for the individual to decide when to work, when not, and for how long, the less positive corollary being the absence of some guaranteed or predictable work. And with this, there may be less clarity about when one is at work and when not. There can be advantages in being required to perform rather than be present at work, but they may be offset by a requirement to be available or contactable for work purposes at all hours. In this way the frontier between work and non-work can become more porous and the capacity of the individual to protect genuinely non-work time compromised. Questions about compensation for time spent "at work" (e.g. by checking messages) during personal time also arise. The concept of "the right to disconnect" is one response (ILO and Eurofound, 2017).[5]

5 See, for example, in France, LOI n° 2016-1088 du 8 août 2016 relative au travail, à la modernisation du dialogue social et à la sécurisation des parcours professionnels (1), Article 55.

Work, place and space

In the same way that change is increasingly enabling or requiring people to work at any time, it is also opening up new opportunities for people to work anywhere.

The process of globalization has redrawn the international division of labour, which will continue to evolve in response to the various factors which inform decisions about the location of production and the provision of services (see Issue Brief No. 6). Global value chains will be reconfigured (see Issue Brief No. 10), with work, jobs and tasks shifting to different locations as a result.

The fluidity of location will also be experienced by the individual at work. Increasingly, although not universally, it is becoming less necessary or advantageous to group together significant numbers of workers in large production facilities. Formal, physical workplaces and working arrangements are "fissuring" (Weil, 2014), partly as a consequence of new production models based on the increased use of contractors and subcontractors. And the diversification of working arrangements means that workers will move between them routinely rather than staying in any one for a prolonged period.

Moreover, the application of information and communication technologies allows more and more work to be done outside any fixed, collective workplace. That can entail, at one stage, offering individuals the option of working from home or some other remote location, and at another, the definitive abolition of that workplace and consequently the requirement rather than the option of working elsewhere. That is typically the case in the platform economy where, depending on circumstance, work may be done from wherever an Internet connection is available or on an itinerant basis in locations required by the demander of a good or service (see Issue Briefs Nos 5, 6 and 10).

There are evident individual and social benefits associated with such situations. Most obviously, they offer greater choice to the individual on where to live and work; they can reduce congestion and commuting time and pollution too. Additionally, in developed countries – and to some extent in developing economies as well – information technology can connect entrepreneurs to markets, banking facilities and authorities in ways which were not previously conceivable, making viable business models that previously were not (see Issue Briefs Nos 4 and 9). Internet connection equally makes possible the provision and performance of work by people in different countries, in rural and urban settings alike, offering those concerned an alternative to migration for work.

But this spatial dispersal of work, particularly when taken in conjunction with the temporal dispersal considered previously, seems likely also to have major implications for the social role of work. In the simplest terms, if work is not carried out by groups of people at the same time or in the same place, if it is performed remotely or virtually, if it is not the subject of any enduring employment relationship, then it will not likely play the social role it once had, or not do so in the same manner (see, for example, Dudwick, 2013). Work would be less associated with the sense of community, the associative behaviour, and the social interaction that comes from physical proximity and personal relationships of trust and familiarity built up over time.

The effect of this spatial dispersion of work on the social fabric remains an open question (see Issue Brief No. 12). Spatial concerns continue to actively configure labour relations – from the local to the global. It is perhaps no coincidence that we have recently observed the emergence of innovative local, and often community-based,

worker organizing strategies, in both developed and developing parts of the world (Fine, 2015; Webster, 2015; Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas, 2018). The reconfiguration of work is accompanied by changing communication practices (e.g. Facebook, WhatsApp). This virtual connectivity can have important effects on the "logic of collective action" as well as overcome requirements to meet physically. This can enhance the associational opportunities of those who might otherwise struggle to connect, including micro-enterprises, women and those on non-standard contracts (Savage, 2006).

There is much room for subjective assessment of these types of development. Some will see them as responding positively to growing individualism in society, offering new possibilities to meet personal preferences and lifestyle choices (Frayne, 2015). Others may see in them the danger of growing isolation and atomization, and a loss of identity as distances in time, space and income between individuals grow, in sharp counterpoise to the hyperconnectivity of the Internet age (for example, Supiot, 2012).

Valuing and measuring work

The idea that work plays a number of universal roles in the lives of individuals and societies – meeting material need, providing individual self-fulfilment, connecting the individual to society – does not mean that everybody wants, or expects, exactly the same thing from work, or that preferences will not change over time. If they are in a position to do so, different people will make different decisions about the trade-offs between paid work and free time, about the workload or responsibilities they wish to take on, or indeed about whether or not to participate in the workforce at all at any given time.

Therefore, changes in the world of work which offer diversity and flexibility would, a priori, seem to offer important opportunities to respond to different personal preferences. It might not be possible to accommodate those preferences within the parameters set out in ILO Convention No. 1 and the requirement to be present in a given work location for a period not exceeding a set number of hours. But equally there is no arithmetical correspondence between the diverse opportunities on offer in a given situation and the wishes of any particular person. The mechanisms and institutions required to match them up include social dialogue and negotiation, supported by certain minimum guarantees (such as a minimum wage and a social protection floor).

If the design of working life to meet the individual's well-being is accepted as an important aspect of the future of work that we want, it follows that the traditional yardstick of economic and social success, GDP per capita, appears increasingly inadequate in capturing and measuring the material well-being, spiritual development, freedom, dignity, economic security and equal opportunity which it is the role of work to promote. GDP does not measure the value of unpaid work that underpins the well-being of individuals and societies throughout the world and throughout the life cycle, the necessity of which often prevents those who perform it from exercising choice (see Issue Brief No. 3).

Incorporating all types of work, including unpaid work, and reflecting the extent to which work actually fulfils its role in the promotion of individual and social well-being in national accounting systems would therefore be an important foundation to the development of policies for the future of work that we want, as well as a key contribution to the measurement of their success.

Some considerations

The reconfiguration of when, how and where we work holds promise and peril. The implications of these changes for individuals and societies in a future of work will depend on our values and commitment to social justice, and the frameworks we develop to shape that future.

- How do we leverage changes in the future of work to meet the needs of enterprises for flexibility, and workers for work–life balance? How can we harness the productivity benefits of new technologies to progressively reduce working time in both developed and developing countries?

- In the context of the rapid spatial dispersion of work, how do we foster a meaningful role for work in our communities and society? What opportunities do new technologies present for anchoring work at the local level and creating a potentially new sense of community?

- What other measures should we rely on for more accurately measuring and valuing all work? What policies could be adopted to adequately value all work, both paid and unpaid?

- Will existing governance frameworks be adequate for a future of work with security, inclusion and equality?

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