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EDITOR'S PICK

The Future Of Work: It's Already Here -- And Not As Scary As You Think



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I analyze corporate HR, talent management and leadership. [FULL BIO](#) ✓

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I recently had the opportunity to speak at the [Singularity University](#) Summit in San Francisco on The Future of Work. After months of research on the topic, reading dozens of books and articles on AI, robotics, and economics, I came to a simple conclusion: the future of work is *already here*. And we all have to deal with it.

The Future Of Work: Why Now?

The phrase "Future of Work," has become a buzz word. (I found 48 million Google hits on the phrase.) There are suddenly hundreds of conferences, books, and articles on the topic, covering everything from artificial intelligence to robotics to income inequality and contingent labor.

The reason for the interest is simple: we are in an economic cycle where jobs, as we know them, are rapidly changing. In fact, I'd venture to say we are reaching a time when jobs, as we know them, are going away. Here are just a few of the changes:

- Today, driven by tremendous transparency in the job market, we change jobs often. The average baby boomer will be looking for a job 11.7. times in his or her career, according to a [BLS study](#), and Millennials [change jobs every two years or less](#).
- Many of us work on a contingent basis. Nearly [40% of US workers are now contingent](#) and platforms like Uber, TaskRabbit and others have made contingent work easier than ever.
- Technology is automating work an unprecedented rate, as artificial intelligence, sensors, and robotics become mainstream. [China is acquiring 160,000 robots](#) just this year. Every week I read an article about [potential job loss from driverless cars and trucks](#), for example.
- The structure of organizations is under attack, changing the nature of work in companies. [92% of CHROs and CEOs](#) tell us they believe their structure must change, and most are looking at ways to flatten the hierarchy, make jobs more dynamic, and further leverage contingent and contract labor.
- Income inequality, a major topic in our political debate, has become an underlying problem. How do policy makers encourage businesses to provide well paying jobs and benefits in the light of automation, contingent work, and restructuring of companies?

The essence of the shift is a simple but big idea: the idea of a "job," with all its protected artifacts like job title, level, and job description, is starting to go away. What is its replacement? People being hired to "do work," get a project done, lead a team, and be ready to move on as the business needs change.

Let me break the Future of Work into three simple parts:

1. First the *personal impact*: why we work, how work fits into our life, how our [careers](#) progress, how we stay current in our skills and capabilities, and how work gives us meaning and purpose.

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2. Second, the *organizational impact*: what are jobs, what roles do people vs. machines play, how are organizations set up, how do we leverage contingent workers, and how do companies redefine jobs as software and robotics become more powerful.

3. Third, the *societal impact*: how do we educate and prepare people for work, how do we transition people when jobs change, how do we support policies for minimum wage, immigration, and work standards, and how do we fix economic problems like income inequality and unemployment.

Today all these issues are under debate. Let's discuss them one at a time.

The Personal Side Of The Future of Work

On the personal side, work has become dynamic, disruptive, and somewhat overwhelming. Thanks to the relentless onslaught of messages and technologies we have at work (and at home), [two-thirds of organizations tell us their employees are overwhelmed](#). Today people look at their phones [eight billion times a day](#), [we have a shorter attention span than a goldfish](#) (Microsoft research), and we don't take enough vacation. (The [average vacation in the U.S. has dropped](#) from 20.3 days to 16.2 days since 1998).

To make it worse, between Twitter, Skype, Snapchat, Whatsapp, Slack, Facebook, Gmail, and Outlook there seem to be a never-ending number of ways people can reach us. The barriers between "work" and "life" have gone away, and we have all become addicted to all the noise (Google finds 85,000 articles citing "phone addiction").

Responding to this challenge, a massive industry of books, videos, classes, and websites has appeared - all focused on ways to better manage our lives. We now have apps and articles to help us relax and focus, tools to help us sleep (many listen to our breathing), wearables which keep track of exercise, and a stream of articles about exercise, nutrition, and super foods. The disciplines of psychology, neuroscience,

human performance, and yoga have come together and we are all become "quantified." (One HR manager told me "is a psychology degree the new MBA?")



Fig 1: The Overwhelmed Employee

While all this is hard on us personally, the bigger problem is that productivity is not going up. As the chart below shows, today's wave of technology (since the birth of the iPhone) has provided the *lowest productivity improvement of any technology era*. (This includes the invention of indoor plumbing, electricity, the automobile, and the mainframe computer). So work has not gotten "easier."

Economists are quite worried about this (Read "[The Rise and Fall of American Growth](#)," by Robert Gordon for more), because productivity decline reduces income growth, economic growth, and long term improvements in standard of living.

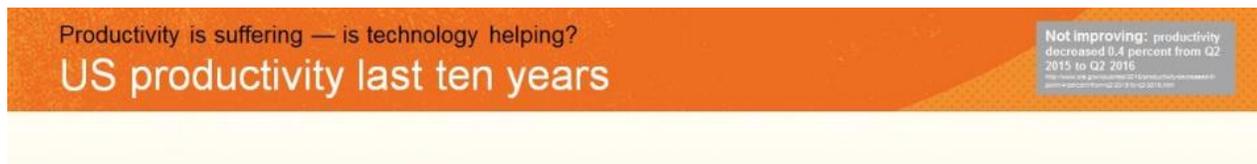


Fig 2: U.S. productivity growth since 2006 (BLS)

Why this productivity gap? Many economists believe the way we measure productivity is out of date, but I think its pretty clear. We really aren't more productive, we just feel like we are. We live in a world where constant messaging distracts us, we are always looking for ways to share what we've done, and we all suffer from FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) when a new message arrives. The companies selling these tools make money on "user engagement," so they've built game mechanics which are quite advanced. Consider the power of the red dot which tells you how many messages you have: can you really stop yourself from clicking on it?

The Change In Our Careers

Not only is work more dynamic and often overwhelming, the way we manage careers has changed. As I write about in "[Hacking the Career: What Should Organizations Do?](#)" we have to accept the fact that our careers no longer go "up" and we can't depend on one company to take care of us for life.

A simple way to understand the shift is to think about the image created by Dick Bowles, author of the book "The Three Boxes of Life". Today, unlike the past, we don't "study," then "work," and then "retire." We learn, work, and enjoy leisure throughout our lives, and hopefully this process goes on until our later years.

Josh Bersin is a leading analyst in HR, talent, leadership, and HR technology. He is also founder and Principal of [Bersin by Deloitte](#).

