

Retraining and upskilling : solutions for the future of (human) work ?

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In three years' time, 42 per cent of task hours will be performed by machines or algorithms and humans will take care of the remaining 58 per cent. New jobs will emerge in fields such as data, employing 133 million people around the world, whilst others, such as postal jobs, will disappear, leaving 75 million people out of work. These are some of the effects of globalisation and the Fourth Industrial Revolution set out in the [2018 Future of Jobs Report](#) of the World Economic Forum. It also estimates that workers will need an average of 101 days of retraining and upskilling between now and 2022.

It was with this outlook in mind that, in May of last year, the EU Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility at the time, Marianne Thyssen, [presented a 'strengthened' European Globalisation Adjustment Fund \(EGF\)](#), to ensure that people "have the right skills" and access to "modern social protection adapted to new forms of work". Set up 12 years ago, the EGF offers co-funding for up to 60 per cent of the cost of initiatives such as training and retraining to reintegrate workers affected by factory closures or the decline in economic sectors affected by globalisation, such as the 4500 Ericsson employees in Sweden who lost their jobs as a result of the "increasingly tough competition from Asian producers".

"Protecting people, not jobs"

The EGF "is an attempt to compensate people that have lost out to automation but it is a mere fraction of EU social spending" - set at 37 per cent in the 2017-2022 budget - Andrés Ortega Klein, researcher at the Elcano Royal Institute think tank and author of *La Imparable Marcha de los Robots* [*The Unstoppable March of the Robots*], tells *Equal Times*. And whilst worldwide corporate spending on digital transformation (DX) is reaching dizzying heights, as shown in reports such as that of the [International Data Corporation](#), "governments are lagging behind", says the researcher, adding that public transition policies "should be protecting people rather than jobs, as we do not know if these will be salvaged".

"Those who lose their jobs to automation are not ready for the new jobs. Not enough is being invested in upskilling," Ortega warns.

Indeed, underfinancing - around €170 million a year (US\$193 million) until 2020 for the whole of the European Union - is a serious handicap. "The EGF is a trial ; there has not been [sufficient] funding ; the thinking was that the market would absorb these people, and it has, but with [poorer pay and conditions](#), leading to the shrinking and decline of the middle classes, and that represents a major threat to democratic stability." The absence of a community-wide strategy is another setback. "The EU should follow the example of Japan, which is retraining its workers, even those in good jobs, skilled work," says Ortega Klein. The land of the rising sun already has a national artificial intelligence strategy. [China](#) is also ready with its artificial intelligence development plan and has commissioned search engine and tech company Baidu to set up a "deep learning laboratory" in

partnership with the country's leading universities.

Meanwhile, the ILO, in the [Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work](#) adopted in June, called for the right to "effective lifelong learning" at the same time as [urging governments](#), employers and workers, as well as educational institutions, to pool their efforts.

For ILO economist and expert in technological change and its impact on employment, Irmgard Nübler, focusing on [the development of skills](#) such as critical thinking or creativity are key to developing a "long-term approach" to the future of work involving governments, employers and civil society. "Skills basically fulfil two roles : they shape the thinking, mindset and attitude of a society and provide the technical skills enabling companies to develop new technologies," she tells *Equal Times*.

"The future of work will be determined by technology and institutions"

Technological retraining alone, however, will not provide us with quality jobs. "Over the last 30 to 40 years, we have shifted towards an economic paradigm whereby growth and economic development have become more important than anything else. That has led to a situation where many institutions have been adapted to support growth, efficiency and globalisation. When we look at decent work, for example, in many countries, the institutions that used to ensure decent work have been cut back or changed based on the argument that they could destroy jobs," recalls Nübler.

"Technology is one thing that determines the type of jobs available, but we also need institutions to regulate the working hours, to ensure decent conditions and social protection, etc. Both technology and institutions will determine the future of work," she says, alluding to the [gig economy or platform economy](#).

Ortega Klein shares this realistic view of technology : "The global foundation for a new social contract will be how technology is able to help economically depressed areas that offer insufficient employment ; how it can be used to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, although the key will continue to lie in how the work is distributed," he points out. "We are already seeing it, throughout the OECD, where the number of hours worked is progressively declining, but the danger lies in building a more unequal society, with some people working long hours for little pay whilst others work much less yet have much higher incomes. Exploring the idea of a Universal Basic Income is an option," he insists.

In addition to the threat of inequality, the [global youth unemployment crisis](#) is, along with climate change, the great challenge of our time, as Joaquín Nieto, head of the ILO Office in Spain told *Equal Times*. According to the statistics portal Statista, the global rate of youth unemployment has been between 10.7 per cent and 11.8 per cent over the last decade. It is not likely to fall by 2020.

To the question of whether training is the solution, Nübler's response is clear. "Social justice needs to be the compass for our choices as a society, we always have to ask ourselves the questions 'Is it fair?', 'Who is benefiting and who is losing?' and 'Is there a balance?'. If, as a society, we think it is not fair, our governments should invest more in everything we need to give young people access to jobs," she adds. The economist also stresses the importance of "listening to what young people want" and to create jobs that match, as well as providing them with incentives to work in sectors where more staff is needed, such as the care and ageing sectors.

As the economist underlines, however, the real challenge is understanding that "we cannot remain in this growth paradigm". "We need to fundamentally change our perspective and to find ways to

balance these different targets in a way that protects the environment, and that will mean less consumption and less production for many developed countries," she concludes.

This article has been translated from Spanish.

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