

Think

new things

Make

new connections

Making the future work for all workers

18-19 November 2021

DITCHILLY

Terms of Reference

How can we ensure that technology and globalisation deliver a better future for all workers? How do we avoid a globalised cognitive elite living in a gilded age whilst the majority lives in economic insecurity, albeit solaced by technology and the material society? What has the pandemic changed and what has it reinforced? How can we provide workers with a sense of agency and ability to adapt, rather than feel that their future has been determined by forces beyond their control?

This Ditchley conference will bring together an eclectic mix of experience, expertise and leadership to explore what is driving current trends shaping the future of work and, most importantly, how they might be addressed on the individual, family, community, national and international level so as to prepare people for the future. This conference builds on two years of work, [in partnership with Lumina Foundation](#), on the theme of education and adaptation as part of the renewal of democracies; our June 2020 conference on *The New Economic Insecurity*; and past discussions and conferences focused on the impact of technological innovation on the future of the political West.

We will look at the prospects for work and workers through a range of lenses.

Structural challenges

Are we seeing a permanent shift in the structure of the labour market (focusing on adults both in their day-to-day and long-term relationships with the labour market) with some individuals and families moving upwards but the middle class becoming hollowed out as the distribution of jobs changes? There is growing anxiety that the emerging structure of jobs will, to put it simply, not be nice—a diminishing number of well-paid jobs and diminishing opportunities for individuals to find a way up the social ladder.

A personal anecdote: in 1986, an entirely unskilled 19-year-old in the UK working over a summer vacation could earn up to £8.50 per hour on the night shift on a snack food production line. In 2021, that £8.50 would equate to £24 after inflation. In 2021, the going rate for such unskilled work in the UK is £7.30 per hour, for example at McDonalds. At the same time, the 2021 worker, from no matter what background, will probably have more wants, needs and material possessions than ever before: an iPhone, a laptop, some 'designer' clothing, a smart bag, ensuite accommodation, etc. How did these apparently contradictory changes come about? What do they mean? What happens next?

There are plenty of trends suggesting that the future is going to work well for holders of capital able to invest funds in technologically driven improvements in productivity. The future also looks relatively bright for those who acquire skills and knowledge prized in the technology driven knowledge economy and especially the habits and capabilities to continue to acquire new skills throughout their careers. But the outlook looks much less certain for people engaged in lower skilled work or even quite highly skilled work that is of a nature susceptible to automation, across both manual and intellectual tasks. The uncertainty is not only in the risk of job loss, but also the stress of constant income *maintenance* with many experiencing unpredictable and fluctuating hours, and volatile earnings.

Does the current stagnation in middle and lower incomes represent a lasting change in the nature and shape of national economies? To what extent is this stagnation in income growth for the working and middle classes a result of a failure to increase productivity through investment in technology and how does this combine with globalisation (outsourcing of production to countries with cheaper labour) and immigration and guest worker policies (bringing in of cheaper labour to industrialised economies)? What can government industrial policy and private sector investment do to change the shape of economies to deliver a more equal distribution of well-paid jobs and a better geographical spread? What about, alongside industrial policy, labour market policies, education policies and policies to reduce or end cost

externalisation and subsidies that weaken an economy's efficiency? What range of new roles will the march of technology bring and will these new roles help build a new middle class?

What can individuals do, whether personally or organised collectively to shape better jobs? Is the decline in organised labour and the increased strength of market forces permanent?

Not everyone accepts that the percentage of people facing economic insecurity—irregular and insufficient income for the basics—is growing. But the June 2020 Ditchley conference on *The New Economic Insecurity* “heightened appreciation (for participants) of economic security and how unevenly it is distributed” (the conference rapporteur Steven Pearlstein's summary is [here](#)).

Educational challenges

What kind of skills, knowledge and expertise are we going to need for the future? How can they be taught and re-taught continuously over the course of a working life to give individuals and communities the best chance of thriving in a fast-changing economy? To what extent can improved continuous education address structural changes in the economy? Will more or better education for those at the bottom or middle of the labour market increase the number of available jobs, or will it simply raise the level of competition for the jobs that exist? Are current educational systems matched to emerging new roles and how should they evolve from cradle to grave?

It is clear that the old model of learn, earn and retire is no longer sustainable or even desirable for many. Extending lifetimes—fifty percent of those being born today are expected to live to a hundred—mean that retirement is going to have to be pushed back. Many tasks done today by human beings, both cognitive and manual, are going to be completed by semi-autonomous complex machines, supervised to some extent by humans. A fast-changing environment means that learning must either be continuous or repeated at frequent intervals. How can education keep up with the pace of change?

How do we help form more people who feel a sense of personal agency—the potential to shape the world as well as be shaped by it—and are able to take charge of their own continuous education, drawing on the vast reservoir of resources already available online? How will the practice of teaching need to change? What are the changing roles of schools and universities within communities? What are the implications for credentials?

Who is responsible for this learning and who ultimately pays for it?

The term “occupational stasis” was coined to represent the fact, based on considerable research, that it is rare for workers entering the labour market in low-skill jobs—whether in agriculture, engineering, healthcare or financial services—to progress to higher-skilled jobs during their lifetimes. Is occupational stasis—which must also imply reduced social mobility—going to increase further? How can continuous education break occupational stasis?

At the same time, we are going to continue to develop new wants and needs, and human creativity and craft and personal interaction will continue to be prized but not necessarily well paid, except for a tiny minority. We value caring professions emotionally but there is no indication, even after the pandemic, that we are willing to pay for them at more than market rates. How is our conception of “good work” and its rewards evolving and how might and should this impact on policy?

The Networked Society and Work

Personal connections have always been interwoven uneasily with more readily acknowledged systems of credentials, assessments, progress reports and interviews to determine who gets appointed, who gets promoted and who wins the contract. But the modern networked society is taking this to a new level, with the network the paramount means of connection and exchange. It is not clear whether networks deliver more ‘unfair’ advantage than they did in days of freemasonry and old school ties—although social

mobility has arguably slowed—but they are certainly more visible and discernible through LinkedIn and other platforms.

To what extent is networking now one of the prime targets for work orientated education? How can we increase equity, social mobility and access to networks, making them more dynamic, democratic and porous and less biased? What are the roles of family and culture in the acquisition and development of networks and how does this influence the employment prospects for underrepresented groups, such as black and white working-class boys? Too few black and white working-class boys enter prestigious academic institutions and too few black students take up apprenticeships. How do networks and connections shape these paths and at what point could intervention of some sort increase social mobility?

Work, globalisation, the Indo-Pacific and strategic rivalry

The last twenty years have been all about the impact of globalisation on economies and the workforce. Industrial jobs were outsourced to cheaper sources of labour, whilst cheaper labour was imported to handle jobs that local populations were not prepared to do at the price offered. As we move into an age of geopolitical competition and strategic rivalry between democracies and China, what will be the impact on the workforce? Will the repatriation of industries for strategic resilience mean a resurgence in manufacturing in advanced countries—even if highly automated?

What will strategic rivalry mean for how work is perceived both by employers and employees? Will national competition mean a sense of increased purpose? Will there be a shift away from individual fulfilment as the aim of work and a move to a more national sense of purpose, similar to that in times of war?

A Just Green Transition—or the next big shock?

Action on climate is clearly urgent and governments are likely to set yet more challenging targets at COP26 in Glasgow in November. But there is as yet no agreement as to how these targets will be met and how the impact on the economy and the workforce will be mitigated.

What will be the impact of climate action on the world of work? How can negative impacts be mitigated as whole industries transition? What are the opportunities? How many quality jobs will the green economy deliver? Are we ready for the scale of the structural change necessary to deliver the skills that will be needed?

A pandemic of uncertainty and reflection

It is early days but what are the long-term implications of the pandemic?

The pandemic crisis has showcased human ingenuity and compassion—innovation on vaccines taking place at breakneck speed; and communities coming together to look out for the most vulnerable. All of this while adapting to the realities of virtual life. Some have been inspired and others are simply burnt out. As was reflected in Ditchley discussions throughout the pandemic, we are looking at ourselves anew, trying to work out where we are headed and why. The last two years have left some—particularly in financial and technology sectors—much better off and others much worse off. Some people are questioning if their work is worth the sacrifice and re-evaluating how much time they want to devote to it, including on uncomfortable commuter trains. Others have discovered that different sectors offer a better balance.

Will we see a permanent shift towards an expectation of flexible working? What does that mean in turn for people's achievement of a 'work-life balance' and how that mysterious concept is conceived? How will the shift to flexible working affect the places and communities in which we live and those in which we used to work? Is there an opportunity to re-imagine the place of work in our lives?

The interruption of flows of immigrant labour have shifted the market balance at least temporarily and in certain sectors wages are rising sharply. Is the current reduction in the global mobility of labour a short term or long-term trend and what will be the effects?

For the middle part of the discussion, we will break into a series of working groups to address these issues from three different perspectives:

Groups A, D and E will look at these challenges from **the perspectives of citizens, unions and civil society**. What can citizens do to prepare for the shifting landscape of work ahead? What can be done to make sure that landscape is shaped equitably, for example on a green transition? Do we have cause to be optimistic or pessimistic about the future of all workers? How can we increase our ability to shape the future and a sense of some control and agency? How should companies and government interact with citizens and the organisations they create, whether civil society or work based unions? What are the prospects for organised labour in the modern economy? What can and should be done locally, nationally and internationally?

Groups B and D will look at the issues from **the perspective of education**. How do government sponsored systems of continuous education need to grow and evolve? How can employers contribute to the educational and training development of the workforce? What training and support should be provided? How does adaptation for the future of work fit in the ESG agenda? How can companies make sure they can find the skilled workers they need to thrive and to continue to increase productivity? Who should pay for continuous education and who is responsible for this? What can and should be done locally, nationally and internationally?

Groups C and E will explore these issues from **the perspective of government policy and employer practice**. What frameworks and legislation need to be put in place for the new landscape of work, for example on the gig economy and precarious work? How is protection of workers in industries to be combined with climate change action? How will trade policy need to evolve to cope with the evolution of work? If large areas of work, sometimes geographically focused, are going to be disrupted by the implementation of new technologies, then how can government ease the transition? Is it better to sustain dying jobs for a transitional period or to concentrate on creating new industries? What does government need to do for its own workforce? What needs to happen on tax and national insurance? Are more radical measures—for example basic minimum income—required to address structural imbalances in the emerging economy? If government is blocked by political paralysis then what can employers do themselves as the concept of a company's role in society evolves, perhaps, towards stakeholder capitalism? What can and should be done locally, nationally and internationally?