

# 'The End of Work': a futurist's grim warning

Don Noel



Seven years ago, there were more than 60,000 workers making aircraft and missile parts in Connecticut; at the end of 1996, there were barely 36,000. The Courant reported Tuesday.

The picture was brightened by a gain in computer and data processing jobs from about 10,700 to 18,700, and a slight increase in people making medical instruments and supplies, according to the Connecticut Technology Council.

Nonetheless, technology jobs — one-sixth of all the state's private sector employment, paying almost \$20,000 a year more than the state's average \$36,800 wage — are down.

It will get worse, says Jeremy Rifkin, author of "The End of Work." In the postindustrial information era, the lucky "knowledge workers" will do fine, but there won't be enough jobs to go around. The proportion of unneeded workers will grow.

Restoring a vibrant economy by better training and education and by luring new companies is a vain hope in the Rifkin diagnosis: Technology will replace people faster than we can invent new ways to use technology.

Incredible? A century ago, the third or more of Americans working on farms would have been incredulous if told that American farms in 1997 would produce a food surplus with only 2 percent of the work force.

That's the fate that awaits most workers today, Rifkin told a University of Hartford audience last week in the annual Ellsworth Lecture. We'll have to make major changes in the way we organize society, he warned, and there isn't much time to prepare.

One change, he suggested, is to shorten the work week to spread jobs among more people. Some German industries have created a four-day week for five days' pay in exchange for more flexible scheduling to allow round-the-clock production.

Shorter working hours could be a plus for our teen-troubled society, Rifkin says. Parents could spend more time with their children — not "quality time" squeezed into frantic days, but time enough for patient, solid rapport and guidance.

Even a shorter workday or week won't absorb the surplus job-seekers, however, Rifkin says. Besides the two traditional sectors — public (government) and private (business) — he proposes a third sector, "the civil society."

He means what most of us think of as volunteer work with community and charitable groups — except that he says we'll have to pay for such work to provide people sustenance. If we don't, more people will turn to "the outlaw society," already the fastest-growing part of the economy.

We'll either pay a growing number of Americans for putting their time and energy into strengthening our communities, or a growing number of have-nots will make a living preying on the haves — and we'll spend more money incarcerating as many as we can.

Although Rifkin lived up to his reputation as a radical thinker, his ideas are hard to refute.

Early in his U of H lecture, he asked how many in the audience knew someone who had been "downsized"; almost every hand went up. How many knew someone who found a new job at the same or better pay? Only a few hands were raised.

We all see the handwriting on the wall; the question is whether we will summon the wit and courage to design alternatives before joblessness overwhelms us and makes American

society explosively unworkable.

Paying large numbers of our neighbors to work in the civil society won't come cheap. The few who keep their jobs and make big bucks in the information era, Rifkin proposes, shouldn't mind paying for stability.

Maybe not — when the crisis he predicts looms larger. Meantime, our state and national elected leaders are cutting taxes for the very people whose affluence could seal Rifkin's proposed new social contract.

If you missed the speech, read the book. If Rifkin is right, we postpone hard decisions now only at the risk of a grim future.



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