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Will Our Future Be Workable?

There is something about us human beings that doesn't like work. We look forward to weekends and vacations and retirement. We speak disparagingly of those who love work—workaholics, we call them. Sometimes we think it almost blasphemous to like work; after all, wasn't work God's punishment for the sins of Adam and Eve? Our futuristic musings are virtual hymns to anti-work; machines run everything, make everything, do everything.

And yet we value work—very nearly worship it. We assign it great dignity and moral power. We look down on those who don't (or won't) work, counting them as less than full contributing members of society. In our ideal world, *everybody* would have a job.

Is there any way to reconcile these two contradictory ideas?

The question is not merely philosophical. It has deep implications for our society, particularly as machines (robots, computers and the entire range of Information Age technology) take over more of the work that humans used to do. It's something Jeremy Rifkin has been thinking a great deal about.

"On the micro level," he said the other day, "every business leader and CEO is determined to replace bodies with thinking machines. The machines are more reliable and more productive; they make fewer demands and work longer hours. Using them gives a company a major advantage.

"But on the macro level, if everybody uses machines to replace human beings, the obvious question is: Who will buy their products?"

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It's a point he made in his new book, "The End of Work," and in a fascinating interview. "I recently talked to the Young Presidents' Organization, and I asked these young executives how many of them are re-engineering and downsizing and letting people go, and most of them raised their hands. How many of them saw fewer employees in their corporate futures? All of them. But when I asked them what they were going to do with these people—their customer base as well as their worker pool—they had no idea.

"They are smart enough to see that they are building tremendous inventories in the face of falling purchasing power, but they haven't seen the connection—that both have the same source."

There are other similar dilemmas on the man vs. machine landscape. For example, says Rifkin: "We already have near-workerless factories in such industries as insurance and banking—and not just because the machines are more efficient. There are advantages to having a small, highly trained work force that go beyond efficiency or even health insurance costs. Pensions, for instance, are a big chunk of employer costs, and the fewer workers you have the smaller the outlays for pension plans.

"But as corporations let people go, the pension funds dwindle, and then you discover that it is the pension funds that have kept the economy going; they are the main form of savings for the capitalist system, a third of the bond and stock markets, worth more than the commercial assets of all the banks in America. They are, in fact, the main source of funds for the shift to the Information Age."

There's a third dilemma. As much as companies love low-cost production and high profits, they fear instability. But the same forces that produce the one threaten to produce the other. The incipient instability is not immediately obvious, as it might be in periods of high unemployment. But look at the nature of much of today's employment: part-time work, contingent work, sporadic work—erstwhile employees transmogrified into "independent contractors," which is to say workers without security and the fringe benefits we had come to expect.

Not only do insecure workers buy fewer of the goods businesses want to sell, which tends to destabilize markets, but they also tend to earn less, thereby accelerating the polarization of rich and poor. The very economic changes that make entrepreneurs rich also create the instability and uncertainty that threaten their economic survival.

The issues Rifkin raises seem so obvious that you wonder why we haven't spent more time talking about them. Most of our future-of-work conversations explore only the edges of his concerns. We recognize that work is becoming more technical, but take little notice of the fact that there will be less of it. We talk about the growing gap in real earnings between the elite workers and the blue-collar class, but we delude ourselves into believing that the answer lies in periodical retraining. We accept the idea that work is the solution to welfare dependency—indeed we are ready to accept two-years-and-out as a reasonable way of nudging people back into the world of work.

But to do *what*? It's a question worth exploring.