

INTERVIEW

We're Running Out of Jobs

ECONOMIST JEREMY RIFKIN IS PRESIDENT of the Foundation on Economic Trends in Washington, D.C. A noted opponent of biotechnology, he is taking on another big issue—automation and the information revolution—with his book, "The End of Work." Rifkin spoke recently with NEWSWEEK's Mary Hager. Excerpts:

HAGER: What's the most urgent message of your new book?

RIFKIN: Political parties throughout the world are not addressing what is going to be their No. 1 issue. As we move into the Information Age, computers and robots are replacing whole job categories. In the '60s, when I was in college, about 33 percent were in blue-collar work. Today it's only 17 percent, yet we're out-producing everyone else in the world. By 2025 only 2 percent of the world's work force will be blue-collar factory workers.

What's going to happen to all the workers who are displaced?

The hope was the service area would absorb blue-collar jobs, but now the technological revolution is invading the services. We have virtual companies, flattened to a small entrepreneurial leadership, a technical staff and a core staff. White-collar middle management, secretaries, receptionists are going. Wholesalers are being eliminated as manufacturers deal with retailers directly through electronic interchange.

Aren't new technologies and jobs springing up to take their place?

The trickle-down technology argument is not true today. Even if someone came up with a new product that had universal market potential, you could build these new products in workerless factories and market them with virtual companies. What that will mean is the inevitable decline of mass labor.

Is there no way to pick up the slack?

The only new sector is the knowledge sector—symbolic analysts, engineers, scientists, computer programmers, entertainers, accountants, lawyers. Even

if you could retrain the entire work force for these jobs, there will never be enough to absorb the millions let go in agriculture, manufacturing and service.

Won't this mainly be a problem for highly industrialized countries?

Every country is creating a two-tier society, with the top 20 percent moving into the knowledge sector. The bottom

in more important aspects of life—civic life, spiritual life, personal and family life. Or it could lead to tremendous disintegration by locking out the masses. Technology is a double-edged sword.

What is needed for this renaissance to take place?

We need to shorten the workweek to 30 hours by 2005 in every country. In the past, working people said they wanted to take part of their increased productivity in shorter hours, better pay, better benefits. This time it is not happening that way. Employers are shortening the work force but not the workweek. Some workers work overtime and the rest don't have enough work, so both parents work.

That causes other problems . . .

Every industrial country worries about the disintegration of the family because no parents

are at home. You can't restore the family unless you restore parents back into the family. I propose parents work while their children are in school, then come home when they do. A 30-hour workweek should be the rallying cry of the Information Age.

Even so, what will become of the millions no longer needed in the workplace?

That question is critical. Every country ought to consider providing an income voucher as an alternative to welfare, for those willing to be trained for meaningful work in the nonprofit sector, performing service or advocacy in their communities. That's the only arena that can absorb all the people who aren't needed in the market or government. Social skills are the only ones the computer can't take over. Operating a daycare center with 30 kids is too complex for a computer, whereas surgery can be done by robots.

And if we don't go in that direction?

The alternative is putting more people in jail. If we don't begin a serious debate on this, there's going to be more crime and more violence. People forced out of the marketplace will take by force what they can't earn.



CHRIS KLEPONIS—NEWSWEEK

Jeremy Rifkin

By the year 2025 only 2 percent of the world's work force will be blue-collar factory workers.

80 percent in every country are scrambling, with the middle class trying to hang on. That's why we're seeing such a volatile middle class in every country.

Without jobs, can economies survive?

As you let people go, there's not enough purchasing power to absorb an increase in productivity. That's the Achilles' heel of the Information Age. In the short run, it is cheaper to replace workers with technology, but in the long run it is the kiss of death because there's not enough purchasing power.

There must be something positive about the Information Age?

We're on the cusp of a technology revolution that could create a renaissance for human civilization, freeing us for more leisure and giving time to engage