

Jobs of the future: death knell or opportunity?

by [Peggy De Prins](#) on Sep 20, 2017 in [HR & Organizational Development](#)



The concept of the “Future of Work” is gaining traction, not just in academic discussions and institutions, but in enterprises and labor negotiations as well. It’s a thought that can create panic and fascination at the same time. What will the jobs of the future look like?

Many of our jobs will change or even disappear, this much is certain. Our grandparents used to say this in the good old days and, inevitably, our (grand)children will say the same thing in the future. Hence, change will occur across generations. However, the pace of change differs from generation to generation. We can expect that the expiration date of qualifications and competences will become even shorter.

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This also holds true for the lifespan of organizations and enterprises. And so, the mission to be an effective employer will become more complex. For our grandparents, a good employer represented security and certainty. In the future, a good employer will reinforce sustainability by developing skills and talents. Besides guaranteeing purchasing power, guaranteeing employability will be an important element in labor negotiation (“social dialogue”).

Apocalypse now?

The future of our jobs stirs a lot of debate. Technology pessimists point out the likelihood of job destruction, especially in the intermediate segments of the labor market. This may cause the labor market to become even more polarized. Besides (or, in reaction to) this pessimism and even fatalism, we hear many creative responses. The future of jobs is man-made and lies, above all, in our hands. The importance of a focus on training and retraining throughout your career is central to the debate. The employee of the future will not stop learning at the age of 20, but will engage with his or her talent, knowledge and competencies throughout his or her career.

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Obsolescence (another word for the ageing of competencies and qualifications) will be a new risk (similar to occupational accidents or diseases), against which we will have to be ultra-vigilant (Sels, Vansteenkiste & Knipprath, 2017). In turn, the employer of the future should consider investing in a sustainable career path for his employees, realizing that those careers are only partly within his own sphere of influence and organization. This requires courage and effort by both parties, when it comes to "social dialogue".

Social partners come into play

In this case, we are building on the optimistic scenario, in which our jobs do not disappear immediately, but our responsibilities and division of work are constantly changing. Hence, the qualitative impact outweighs the quantitative impact (De Vos & Gielens, 2016).

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Here's an example to clarify this. With people working as machinery operators, we notice an evolution from repetitive tasks to problem analyses, an evolution from manually intervening in the machine to working with interfaces. Nancy, an employee and representative for the Continental automotive plant in Mechelen, recently explained this evolution in an inspiring testimony during a seminar on "digitalizing, robotizing and labor." She told us how she started working as an operator with mainly manual tasks in the 90s. Because of the automation of the assembly lines and the fact that robots took over more of the manual tasks, her functions and job content changed immensely.

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Many of the (mainly female) operators had the chance to retrain to be assistant technicians, a role with a lot of monitoring duties and responsibilities, aimed at fixing small malfunctions. Although some operators weren't suited to the work (some retired, others returned to their operator jobs) and although the change initially caused a lot of stress, uncertainty and work pressure, Nancy saw it as positive in the long term. She was happy that she could continue working at Continental and experienced the change as a kind of job enrichment.

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Thank you, Nancy. This kind of good practice is indispensable within the new social dialogue; where employer and employees pool their competencies and look creatively for realistic solutions when it comes to reallocating jobs and work. Practices that go beyond the "us vs them" way of thinking and look for a common interest, rather than moving quickly to redundancies and retirements.

Storytelling & job engineering

This requires a sustainable investment in human resources by the employer. First and foremost, it assumes that line managers understand the changes and know how to explain them. Storytelling involving the impact of technology, globalization, etc., on jobs within sectors and companies will be more important than ever in the future. Second, besides a transparent framework, co-creation is necessary to achieve realistic solutions. Setting up pilot programs may help. In Nancy's case, two co-workers who had successfully made the transition from operator to assistant technician were at the heart of the large-scale retraining operation.

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The Netherlands may also be an inspiration when it comes to co-creation. Today, terms such as "job engineering" are in vogue. Managers, HR and employees constantly try to enhance

jobs to allow employees to work according to their skills and preferences, but at the same time try to keep those jobs in line with the expected structural changes. One useful tool in this process is the “Tasks of the Future” approach.

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The TotF approach starts with a co-creative session with the management, HR and the employee council, themed “What are the tasks of the future?” – identifying which tasks will gain in importance and which will become less important or remain stable. Subsequently, the tasks are put into a digital application (www.baananalyse.nl) and presented to employees: For which tasks are they effectively employable and does that make them future-proof? What percentage of work will be feasible in five years and what percentage of the current workforce does that equate to? Finally, HR actions are identified to lower the thresholds of qualification and motivation and/or to adapt the speed and direction of job developments to the motivation and qualifications of the current workforce.

The representative as change agent

For employees, this approach requires letting go of certainties and identifying and seizing opportunities to develop themselves further and to retrain. Bearing in mind Nancy’s story, it seems realistic to think that unions can play a reinforcing role in this process. They can also work to ensure the company has a career policy for everyone. In areas where enterprises fail, the union can set up its own service, providing employees with career counseling, either voluntarily or on the recommendation of staff representatives.

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At the same time, the union can work with the theme of change, raising its members’ awareness and cautioning them against automatically rejecting every change of responsibility, role or employer. This way, union representatives can perform a kind of change agent role in the workplace, and they can anticipate employees’ questions, expectations and concerns. A clear framework and sufficient and accurate information from management remain necessary conditions for this. **After all, involvement without insight quickly leads to verdicts without prospects.**