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WORK

A view from 100 years hence

by Danny Dorling
illustration by John Riordan



Imagining the future and then looking back at the recent past from that place can create a clearer image of where we are today. Today, more of us are working at older and older ages. Usually elderly people would rather not undertake the mundane jobs that increasingly they have to apply for. Suicide rates among the elderly are highest in those towns and cities of Britain where more of the elderly are in paid work after age 65. If current trends continue then more of us will have to work as employees into our old age in the future and fewer and fewer of us will be happy with the work we are offered. Only a few very affluent people are likely to have pensions large enough to enable them to avoid paid employment in part of their old age. More and more of today's young adults have no pension provision other than the state pension. Of any age group the greatest wealth inequalities of all are found between groups of pensioners. By pensionable age people have either amassed very little wealth or have great savings including a pension and own valuable property. Among the affluent and the very rich have no pension. It is a form of insurance they do not need.

As the riches of the best off 1% of people grow and grow, more jobs in future will be funded on saving their needs. Today that small group secure about 15% of all income in Britain, about 15% of all income tax is taken. If top income tax rates in the future are to fall, as they have in the past, our current children, then there will be fewer jobs provided by the state and more people directly employed by the service industry. More cleaners, cooks, nurses, gardeners, personal assistants, housekeepers, drivers, personal shoppers, trainers and more employed in jobs that currently don't exist but which will be crucial to provide for new tastes and features among those who believe that it is their worth it.

In the future people have the very top most well work longer hours than they do today. Those at the very top can choose their hours, but those just beneath them cannot. The need to meet the morning commute may lead to greater numbers starting paid work earlier and earlier in the morning. Even if this is not through physically being at the office, scanning emails and messages every waking hour can waste time what used to be an eight hour working day into something much longer. In Britain in 2014, millions on part time employment said they would prefer to have a full-time job, but we had never collectively worked as many part-timers. Part-time work simply did not pay enough.

People don't really want to work longer and longer hours. They are given little choice as hourly wage rates fall and the cost of living rises. It is not where the jobs are better paid the cost of living rises faster than salaries. You can't get enough, you have to work longer hours and get a little or two in to cover for never being home before the children go to bed. But to make all the financial work you have to ensure you do not pay the maximum for most high paid and low paid jobs in the future will increase numbers. There will be fewer average occupations. In 2014 more people than ever before believed they were average white lower than ever work. At first the government subsidised mass childcare to ensure that having small children for ever was not an income expense leaving paid employment.

great argument they put forth for leaving passengers along the clogged roads. In the state was pulled out of areas of subsidising areas like transport, education and health care, wages in each area fell. People moved from job to job more often than they had in the past. Those top drivers who could no longer endure 14 or 15-hour days gave up when they could find another job. Often caring for the elderly, the monthly £1 of young children. Driving a taxi had only required a driving license. Many of these jobs did not require any qualifications or much experience. The needed qualifications to be promised but not to do the basic job. There were also more and more guest workers to carry out the manual work. A very economically integrated country tends to generate a lot of opportunities for poorer migrants. Even by 2014 most young women in England at age 19 were going to university to try to avoid having to take manual work later in life. Children had become manual work. A qualification before was required. But that first degree would not guarantee you good employment, you needed a postgraduate qualification and an internship you paid for the privilege of understanding, an apprenticeship where you were paid for less than the minimum wage.

Of course many people in 2014 enjoyed their work. Many had worked in the same institution for some time and had got good at what they did. Their customers, colleagues, patients, clients, fans and students got to know them. It was a bit of something special and the bottom line. But such relationships became more as spent in time. And younger employees were not taken on with the idea of keeping them on for that long. The young knew that and so jumped from firm to firm almost as fast as their wages paid. The idea of having any loyalty to an institution, a school, a harnessing business, a garage, a construction plant or a building firm went out of fashion.

As well it surprised further, those who wanted to start their own business found it difficult to borrow to do so. Algorithms, not people, ran banks. All signs of debt that they spoke moved to the assets of the business, the home that had been mortgaged to finance it. Even before the financial crash of 2008 some 70% of business need registered to get help to start within ten weeks. Otherwise the UK would have been swamped with antique shops and other ventures that so many people had dreamed of doing for starting up. So many firms have to do so as we are born the more that must die.

Big corporations grew larger but almost all also eventually failed. The majority of the largest firms in the UK in 2014 had not existed a hundred years earlier, almost 90 were gone a hundred years later, and so that created an air of impermanence. Young graduates fought to get places in their later careers - ready for the high salaries promised later, desperate for some security and obscure that were near their minds would be dismissed. Within eight weeks that had those who started with such before were still employed, just a seventh of all those selected as being so promising managed nearly years in the firm. But it had to be that way, almost every firm in London employed hundreds of people aged over 65. Those who didn't make the grade could drive taxis, manage guest-worker cleaners or clean between their hair in a barbers.

No one should have been surprised, all that had happened was a continuation of what had already been in place by 2014. Every year for a hundred years the trends continued onwards with only the occasional slip. By 2114 most people knew they were poor and insecure, more were working longer for less than their parents or grandparents had, but they knew - new much less than 1% - were taking more than the best-off have had. They still know better than that if any that, or their parents, or grandparents or great-grandparents had tried hard enough - had been good enough - they too would have got what they deserved. Jobs in ways they were right if we'd all just tried harder in 2014 all this could have been different. But we'd already been taught to worry about job ourselves.

Danny Dorling is the Harold Macmillan Professor of Geography at Oxford University. He is the author of numerous books, including The No-Nonsense Guide to Equality and All that is Solid - The Street Housing Disaster. Danny's latest book is 'Inequality and the UK', published by Verso.

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Imagining the future and then looking back at the recent past from that place can create a clearer image of where we are today. Today, more of us are working at older and older ages. Usually elderly people would rather not undertake the mundane jobs that increasingly they have to apply for. Suicide rates among the elderly are highest in those towns and cities of Britain where more of the elderly are in paid work after age 65. If current trends continue then more of us will live as employees in our old age in future and fewer and fewer of us will be happy with the work we are offered.

Only a few very affluent people are likely to have pensions large enough to enable them to avoid paid employment in part of their old age. More and more of today's young adults have no pension provision other than the state pension. Of any age group the greatest wealth inequalities of all are found between groups of pensioners. By pensionable age people have either amassed very little wealth, or have great savings including a pension and own valuable property. Among the affluent only the very rich have no pension. It is a form of insurance they do not need.

As the riches of the best-off 1% of people grow and grow, more jobs in future will be focussed on serving their needs. Today that small group secure about 15% of all income in Britain, about 10% after income tax is taken. If top income tax rates in the future are to fall, as they have mostly fallen over current lifetimes, then there will be fewer jobs provided by the state and more people directly employed by the very richest minority. More cleaners, cooks, nannies, gardeners, personal accountants, housekeepers, drivers, personal shoppers, trainers and more employed in jobs which currently don't exist but which will be created to pander for new tastes and fashions among those who believe they are most worth it.

In the future people near the very top may well work longer hours than they do today. Those at the very top can choose their hours, but those just beneath them cannot. The need to beat the morning commute may lead to greater numbers starting paid work earlier and earlier in the morning. Even if this is not through physically being at the office, scanning emails and reminders every waking hour can easily turn what used to be an eight-hour working day into something much longer. In Britain in 2014 millions in part-time employment said they would prefer to have a full-time job, yet we had never collectively worked as many paid hours. Part-time work simply did not pay enough.

People don't really want to work longer and longer hours. They are given little choice as hourly wage rates fall and the cost of living rises. In areas where the jobs are better paid the cost of living rises faster than salaries. You can, if paid enough, live a long way out, work long hours and get a nanny or two in to cover for never being home before the children go to bed. But to make all the finances work you have to ensure you do not pay the nannies too much. High paid and low paid jobs in the future will increase in number. There will be fewer 'average' occupations.

In 2114 more people than ever before believed they were average while fewer than ever were. At first the government subsidized mass childcare to ensure that having small children to look after was not an excuse against taking paid employment. They reduced benefit levels year on year to make the punishment for not working for someone else a more grinding poverty than each year before. Numerous sanctions were imposed, cutting all welfare benefits for a time if a 'claimant' - as people came to be called - transgressed and missed a meeting.

Out of desperation more people took jobs with zero house contracts, or started their own business. The Royals Society of Arts (and Commerce) reported that people who started their own business were less well paid but happier than those with direct employers. They could have put it the other way round and said that for most employees the experience of having a boss was so bad that despite the slightly greater job security they were more miserable than even self-employed taxi drivers.

Taxi drivers were a case in point. More and more people took to driving around in their cars, having paid for taxi plates and a radio, looking for someone who wanted a lift. As more people became drivers all the drivers had to drive for longer and longer each day to pick up the same number of fares. They became more tired, more irritable, less safe drivers, but the overall numbers in employment rose. When bus subsidies were removed more people without cars had to use taxis. Fewer buses meant more private sector employment, more cars, more congestion and more pollution. However, more employment is not necessarily better employment. Few taxi drivers talk of the great enjoyment they got from ferrying passengers along the clogged roads.

As the state was pulled out of areas of subsidizing areas like transport, education and health care, wages in each area fell. People moved from job to job more often than they had in the past. Those taxi drivers who could no longer endure 14 or 15 hour days gave up when they could find another job, often caring for the elderly, the mentally ill or young children. Driving a taxi had only required a driving license. Many of these jobs did not require any qualifications or much experience. You needed qualifications to be promoted but not to do the basic job.

There were also more and more guest workers to carry out the menial work. A very economically unequal country tends to generate a lot of opportunities for poorer migrants. Even by 2014 most young women in England by age 19 were going to university to try to avoid having to take menial work later in life. Childcare had become menial work. A qualifications bonanza bloomed. But that first degree would not guarantee you good employment, you needed a postgraduate qualification, and an internship you paid for the privilege of undertaking, or an apprenticeship where you were paid far less than the minimum wage.

Of course many people in 2014 enjoyed their work. Many had worked in the same institution for some time and had got good at what they did. Their customers, colleagues, patients, claimants, fares and students got to know them. It wasn't all about making money and the bottom-line. But such relationships became seen as quaint in time. And younger employees were not taken on with the idea of keeping them on for that long. The young knew that and so jumped from firm to firm almost as fast as they were pushed. The idea of having any loyalty to an enterprise, a school, a hairdressing business, a garage, a construction plant or a building firm went out of fashion.

As wealth polarised further those who wanted to start their own business increasingly had to borrow to do so. Algorithms, not people, ran banks. At any sign of default they quickly moved to seize the assets of the business, the home that had been mortgaged to finance it. Even before the financial crash of 2008 some 99% of business newly registered to pay VAT folded within ten years. Otherwise the UK would have been awash with antique shops and other ventures that so many people had dreamt so long for starting up. As many firms have to die as are born. The more that are born the more that must die.

Big corporations grew larger but almost all also eventually folded. The majority of the largest firms in the UK in 2014 had not existed a hundred years earlier, almost all were gone a hundred years later, and yet they exuded an air of permanence. Young graduates fought to get places in their 'starter streams'; greedy for the high salaries promised later, desperate for some security and unaware that every year their intake would be decimated. Within eight years less than half those who started with such fanfare were still employed, just a seventh managed twenty years in the firm of all those selected as being so promising. But it had to be that way, almost every firm in London employed hundred of people aged below 35, and just a few dozen aged over 40. Those who didn't make the grade could drive taxis, manage guest-worker cleaners or stack shelves in their non-retirement.

No one should have been surprised. All that had happened was a continuation of what had already been in play by 2014. Every year (for a hundred years) the trends continued onwards with only the occasional blip. By 2114 most people knew they were poor and insecure, more were working longer for less than their parents or grandparents had, but a tiny few – now much less than 1% - were taking more than the best-off ever had. They told those below them that if only they, or their parents, or grandparents or great-grandparents had tried hard enough – had been good enough- they too would have got what they deserved. And in a way they were right. If we'd all just tried; tried harder in 2014 all of this could have been different. But we'd already been taught just to worry about just ourselves.

Danny Dorling is the Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography at Oxford University. He is the author of numerous books, including *The No Nonsense Guide to Equality* and *All that is Solid - The Great Housing Disaster*. Danny's latest book, is "Inequality and the 1%", published by Verso.