



TASA The Australian
Sociological Association

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Some thoughts for those in the workplace to consider. New Scientist for the 21 June 2016 has raised a question which we ought to be thinking about. Whilst the politicians are raving about the jobs they are going to create, and the terrible payment of social welfare, there is no word as to what these jobs are or where they might be or what will happen when there are no jobs for 50% of the potential workforce. All this, when many jobs are being outsourced overseas because that is cheaper. Others are disappearing because of new technology. Both of these issues are important but it is the last one I want to concentrate on today. How susceptible are our jobs to computerisation? The question isn't new. Fear of machines taking jobs dates back at least to the Luddites in 1811, when British weavers who went on a mill-burning rampage when power looms made them redundant. The economist, John Maynard Keynes in 1930 assumed that robots would take our jobs., He thought that by 2030 the working week would shrink to 15 hours and the rest of our time would be spent trying to live "wisely, agreeably and well". However, that is not going to happen. I once wrote a paper on the question of whether Karl Marx could accept the idea of a non-working class. I came to the conclusion that he had almost got there but was not game to put it in writing. We however, may have to face this question. In 2013 Frey & Osborne, from the Oxford University's Martin Programme on the Impacts of Future Technology, looked at 702 types of work and ranked them according to how easy it would be to automate them. They examined the expected impacts of computerisation on the US labour market, analysing the number of jobs at risk and the relationship between an occupation's probability of computerisation, wages and educational attainment. According to their estimates, about 47% of US employees are at risk. Many people are working more than they used to. Others have told me that in many white collar jobs people find that the contracted hours bare little resemblance to the hours they actually work. Large numbers of workers have already been displaced by computerisation but to date many have been able to find employment elsewhere. The question now is how long can this continue, now that artificial intelligence is being devised to tackle many tasks beyond the mundane and repetitive.

At this point I remembered I had made a submission to the Federal Government's Inquiry into Technological Change in Australia, in 1979. Looking through it, I found I had spent pages showing the arguments from 850BC to the present day that people, for religious and economic reasons, had to work. I pointed out that, in economic terms, the real issue that has to be faced in the coming years is not unemployment but employment.. The decreasing need for human employment, is not being caused by economic depression but by the fact that the gross domestic product can be increasingly maintained without the need to deploy the amount of labour previously used to maintain it. What we must be concerned with is how people can equably share in the continued wealth of the nation and how they can satisfyingly occupy their time. A second problem is that those released from the need to labour will fall unevenly across the range of jobs that currently exist. This will require us to devise some new means of balancing work and other activities, remuneration or income, and the way status is achieved. I must of got something right because I was called to give

further evidence in person. But the chance of beginning the process to do something was lost.

Alan Scott, Continuing Education Officer.