

## Adjusting work, and leisure to a robotic reality

Americans are upset about outsourcing jobs to parts of the world where labor is cheaper. If only all those jobs could be repatriated, they suppose, all would be well. Yet even if all that off-shored manufacturing could be returned to the U.S. United States, many of those jobs would now be automated. Modern machines can make more in less time with fewer errors—and with no coffee breaks, weekends, vacations, or sick days.

This isn't the first time it's happened. Take textiles, for example. Until about 250 years ago, many rural families toiled from dawn to dusk in "cottage industries," spinning, weaving, and sewing fabric into finished products. It was tiresome and inefficient, but offered a meager living to multitudes. The onset of the Industrial Age disrupted that routine by centralizing production in urban factories, where machines produced more output faster and more efficiently than humans.

Still, it took lots of human hands, eyes, and brains to keep the machinery running. Factory labor—much of it supplied by women and children—was cheap and plentiful, making the factory owners happily wealthy. However, owners also viewed workers as expendable. Working conditions cost many their health, limbs, and lives. It wasn't until labor unions got started that sweatshop conditions abated, long hours were reduced, and wages came more into line with the value of work done.

At first, owners were outraged. Safer conditions and higher wages would surely raise prices and reduce profits! But it gradually became clear that healthy workers earning a living wage could afford to buy more of what their labor and expertise produced. Demand for products increased, and operations expanded to meet demand. Instead of dropping, profits actually rose over time.

Today, with modern robotics, once again fewer human hands are needed to sustain a given level of production. But instead of firing excess workers, why not reduce the number of hours per shift, and add another shift to absorb the excess labor pool and make up those lost hours? It sounds economically counterintuitive at first. But consider: To thrive, business needs customers. Robots aren't customers. People with paychecks are.

Keeping workers productive makes better economic sense than tossing them onto the public welfare heap. Wages must also be adjusted, so no worker must struggle to stay out of poverty. How? Use the production-cost savings from robotics. Instead of funneling that cash into the pockets of already wealthy executives and owners (on the repeatedly disproved theory that it will somehow "trickle down"), distribute it among the workers whose effort and expertise actually design and create the products that earn the profits. When more workers are paid a living wage, demand increases; production, hiring, and sales increase to meet demand; and profits follow sales. If competently regulated, the system adjusts to the new natural equilibrium, and everybody's happy!

The free market has produced many wonders, but it isn't a cure-all. It's caused this problem, and so can't be relied upon for a spontaneous solution. It requires intelligent intervention—which rules out most politicians. Call in the economists!

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"GC\_WorkLeisureBalance.docx", created 2016-05-10, last modified 2016-12-03, submitted 2016-11-01 for publication 2016-12-03 as an "Ideas & Voices" guest column.