

PRODUCTIVE PEOPLE: SHOULD THE UK STRIVE TO BECOME A NATION OF PRODUCTIVE WORKERS?

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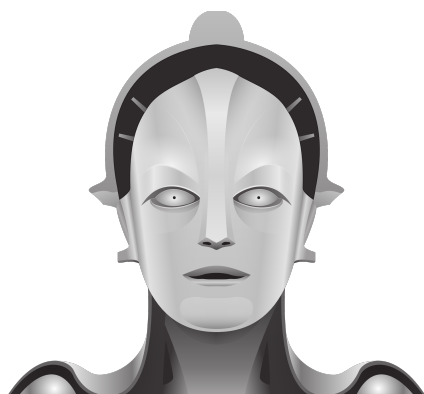


PRODUCTIVE PEOPLE: SHOULD THE UK STRIVE TO BECOME A NATION OF PRODUCTIVE WORKERS?

Paul Connolly, MCA Think Tank Director, argues that productivity should be about equipping workers for fulfilling and productive careers, not just driving them harder

At times of national emergency, in pursuit of reconstruction after crises such as war, whole peoples have freely adopted a collective character of resilience, fortitude and effort. They have been productive. However, they have rarely characterised themselves as such. They have been motivated by battered pride, emergency and the need for a fresh start, not by any especial desire to be 'productive workers'. Yet their lesson is instructive. As the UK confronts Brexit, it will need exceptional resilience at institutional and personal level to thrive. A collective sense of renewal is a proven method of turning such challenges into opportunities.

And more widely than Brexit, the UK in common with everywhere else must face up to the new disrupted, automated economic model. Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, the cautionary tales of Aldous Huxley, the HAL9000, Robocop and the Terminator: for most of the last hundred years we have been periodically prey to collective anxieties that human workers will imminently run their course and give way to machines of superior strength, intellect and reliability. None of these spasms has brought about the expected mass redundancy.



We are most definitely experiencing a prolonged bout of this neurosis now. But what seems different this time is the combination of greatly enhanced machine capabilities and a kind of collective credulousness. Machines that can beat Go grandmasters, produce more reliable oncology diagnostics than human specialists, that can build homes, drive themselves, or store, process and manage unfathomable quantities of information, are undeniably impressive. Moreover, those responsible for creating them now enjoy a rather curious status. Ford was a great industrialist. But only his most zealous followers would have considered him a philosopher. Now prominent digital entrepreneurs theorise publicly on the imminent demise of most of the human workforce, the associated need for a universal minimum income, the dominance and even evolutionary separateness of digital Hyperboreans, or the need to 'cybrogise' human brains to make them more powerful and thus relevant to the modern work environment. For their pains they are often treated not as manifestly interested parties, or even cranks, but as enlightened gurus.

Of course, there is great potential in automation and AI. But there may also be regulatory and even cultural limitations to adoption, at least for the moment, as Anish Shah of

CAPITA suggests. Even where these limitations are subsequently breached and human beings lose out on process work and even aspects of process management, history suggests it is premature to argue that people will lack any kind of role, even in and around automatable industries.

What we can say for certain is that as yet we possess an incomplete understanding about what the human/AI mix in business should be.

We have argued in other articles that there is likely to be a meaningful destiny for human beings despite the current Jeremiads. The concept of 'shared autonomy' envisages an economy in which people accent their inalienable capacities in ways that complement the emerging process excellences of machines. In effect, this would be a reversal of the post-industrial Fordian and Taylorist realities. We would stop organising and training people to be cogs in a machine, but accent their positive, human characteristics. A new, liberal, creative individualism could emerge.

However, we are a long way from this in terms of the workforce our education system, our workplace assumptions, and our wider culture produce. Yet it is essential that we do better, both for overall economic success and for productivity. Technology's productive potential can only be realised by purposeful, knowledgeable and imaginative human beings.

Accordingly, for Brexit and Disruption survival, *Britain Needs Productive People*.

That however is a rubbish slogan – and open to eugenic misinterpretation. And one reason it is rubbish, and wouldn't have been front and centre even in German and Japanese post-war reconstruction, is that 'productive' conjures up 'productivity', and productivity is a threatening, even oppressive term. It implies working harder at the behest of stop-watch wielding time-and-motion monitors. People in the public sector are particularly averse to the word, not least since for frontline professionals – teachers, doctors, nurses, police, care workers – it has often been linked to counterintuitive and seemingly anti-productive tasks, such as filling in forms. Stories about electronic monitoring of the length of toilet breaks by big digital players do nothing to remedy similar aversions among private-sector workers. Neither does a managerial emphasis on output volumes, present even in a service context. Recently, an engineer from my domestic internet provider visited my home to conduct repairs. Within minutes of their arrival they received alerts instructing them to move on to their next destination. Had they done so, I would

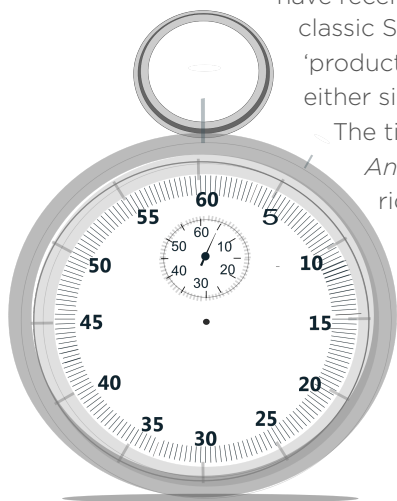
have received a dismal service. The classic Stakhanovite image of the 'productive worker' doesn't help either since it confuses categories.

The tireless horse Boxer in *Animal Farm* works ridiculously long hours. But he isn't necessarily productive. (And his fate is not edifying.)

We need to detoxify the term productivity if people are to embrace the idea of being productive workers.

Productivity must be associated with improvements in working lives and people's prospects. Connecting productivity to job satisfaction or better working conditions, including workplace flexibility, is one aspect of this. Another is to embrace the reinvention of working life that millennials are driving. Productive workforces are creative. But they are also flexible, mobile and restless. They move on. A productive worker is adaptable enough to have many jobs in their lifetime. We must equip workers who crave that mobility to be able to move through many jobs productively, ensuring they have the basic raw material to rise to the inevitable demands of retraining, repeated self-reinvention and fresh thinking. Perhaps most importantly, productive workforces, if seen through a millennial lens, achieve things that are not just useful for the businesses they serve. They also create social goods. We should embrace this notion.

One obvious way to link productivity to the millennial ambition of meaningful achievement is the sustainability dimension mentioned in a previous article. But most of all, productivity needs to be anchored firmly in the language of outcomes.





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