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## Redefining work

Do we need to redefine the way we work? That is the question posed by the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA), in a project to investigate the implications of changing work patterns.

The RSA's contention that it is focusing on "one of the big issues of the day" would appear to be supported by the growing body of literature on the changes already experienced in the way people work. To stimulate debate, the society has published a discussion paper, *Key Views on the Future of Work*, which neatly summarises some of the main arguments on the subject.

Written by Valerie Bayliss, a former director of youth and education policy at the Department of Education and Employment, the paper begins by summarising the sort of changes under discussion. It points out that a predominantly male UK labour force has been replaced by one in which nearly half are women.

The dominance of manufacturing has been broken by the service industries which now employ almost half of all workers. The geography of employment has shifted from the north towards the south and east and nearly every workplace is computerised.

Demographic changes mean that fewer young people are entering work under the age of 18. And a quarter of the population of working age is now economically inactive - rising to half for men aged between 55 and 65.

Full-time work, once the norm, is supplemented by increasing numbers of employees on part-time, temporary or fixed contracts. Self-employment is also on the increase with one in eight now working for themselves.

The RSA seems reasonably assured that all these factors amount to a problem - though Bayliss admits there is considerable debate over the nature of the problem.

Jeremy Rifkin, in *The End of Work* (Putnam), forecasts that the march of technology will create an almost workerless world. Bill Bridges, on the other hand, argues in *Jobshift* (NB Books) that it is not so much work that is disappearing but the employment package we recognise as a job.

Searching for potential solutions, Bayliss turns to Stanley Aronowitz and William DiFazio's book, *The Jobless Future; Sci-Tech and the Dogma of Work* (University of Minnesota Press). This outlines the need for a society where everyone receives a guaranteed income but no able citizen is free from the obligation to work. Such a society, says the paper, would be supported by a more redistributive taxation system and labour market regulation.

Significantly, she notes that almost all the authors she has studied call for more investment in skills. Ewart Keep and Ken Mayhew, for example, argued in a collection of essays on work published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (*Education, Training and Employment Prospects*) that the biggest problem for UK employment is rising demand for skills in those parts of the economy that compete internationally.

Bayliss concludes that the chief distinction in the debate is between "those who believe that the forces operating to reduce jobs are irresistible and those who believe those forces can be controlled".

She adds: "There is a near-universal belief that it is a matter of political will how far the available work, and the resulting income, is shared or concentrated among populations."

Given the history of changing work patterns it may be pertinent that Bayliss remarks upon the lack of discussion over new work. "It is remarkable how little credence, or even debating space, is given to the notion that technology will, of itself, generate jobs of a kind we cannot yet foresee," she writes.

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