

The past and present of work, too

Submission for CHI 2019 “The Future of Work” Workshop

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The ‘Future of Work’ is something that is talked about a lot by researchers and funding councils. In the UK, the ESRC research funding council has an explicit ‘Future of Work’ theme. The EPSRC, another UK funder, has a large theme focused on the ‘Digital Economy’. Researchers, including this one, have taken to the idea of the ‘Future of Work’ with gusto. HCI conferences like CHI and CSCW are full of papers talking about the gig economy, crowd work and the new ways of working that technology might enable in the future. I think it is important that we critically consider the focus on ‘The Future of Work’.

First, as HCI researchers, we should consider the role of technology in the future of work. The ‘future of work’ often seems to be very much driven by technology front and centre. If technology is the solution, then why has productivity growth slowed in recent decades, despite the huge proliferation of workplace technology? I question whether the new technology that is at the heart of the ‘Future of Work’ is likely to improve work. Can technology play a supporting, rather than central role in the future of work, or is the future of work necessarily one of more, faster and more pervasive technology? It is also important to remember that many present day workplaces are not as technologically sophisticated as the ones that HCI researchers find themselves in. The future of work, for many industries, might be the present (or even past) of work in other industries.

When we think about the future of work it is often tempting to think of work being remade at a fundamental level. Perhaps it will be. But we should also be thinking about what we can learn about how work is done now. What works well? What does not? What are the implications of our understanding of work as it is done now for these futures of work? Reversing this perspective, how can we ‘backport’ our findings from novel working contexts? In our investigations of the future of work, we might find new ways of doing things that work well. We might discover that these innovations do not exist in current working practices, but that they might be incorporated. For instance, we may discover something about how people multitask when we are designing the work of the future that could be usefully applied to the present. In this way the future of work agenda can more quickly make concrete contributions with tangible benefits for people working now.

As well as mapping backwards from –what we hypothesize– is the future of work, we might also do well to consider why the majority of work looks as it does now and how it has looked in the past. Alkahtib et al. (2017) conducted an excellent critical evaluation of modern crowdworking through the lens of a much older working practice – piecework. If piecework came and went with Victorian workhouses, why is it now making a comeback? Is it likely to be sustainable? Perhaps it will be, or perhaps, as in the past, people will realise that piecework is not necessarily the best

way of producing high value, high quality products. This is particularly salient nowadays where the highest value, most productive job roles are often difficult to break down into 'pieces'.

There are contradictions in the way that studies of work are perceived by the HCI community. HCI has a grand tradition of understanding some of the 'mundane' aspects of how work happens (e.g., Suchman, 1983). There still a lot to learn about even simple activities like data-entry (e.g., Borghouts, Brumby, & Cox, 2017). But, from informal conversations with researchers in our community, and based on my own experiences of publishing, it is clear that investigations of the practical aspects of what works like for many people are often seen by people in our community as being 'solved' problems. Alternatively they might be seen as 'old' problems that should not be of much concern if, as a discipline, we are looking to the future.

But the contradiction comes because when we look at what the 'future of work' looks like, we see many of these mundane tasks looking at us. Although researchers have experimented with ways of working that are arguably 'new' (e.g., Bernstein et al., 2010), the future of work look a lot like the present and past of work: tasks are frequently monotonous activities like image labelling and transcription. This has led to concerns about the quality of work in this future of work (Kittur et al., 2013).

What, then, does the future of work look like? If we take Amazon Mechanical Turk as an example, it looks enough like work now that we should make sure we're remembering the present of work. What does work look like now? What are the challenges? What impact has technology had on the majority of work that takes place today? The better we can answer these questions, the less likely it is we will be following dead ends when we're designing the future of work.

As a researcher, I am very excited by what the future of work will be. However, I think that for 'the future of work' to move beyond being a buzzword, we need a clearer idea of what we are trying to accomplish as a community. I think that one way to do this is to understand the past and present of work (perhaps with help from colleagues in other disciplines). We also need a clear idea of what we want work to look like in the future – who gets to decide this? Finally, if the future of work agenda is to have any real impact, at least in the short to medium term, then we need to work out how the findings of our investigations of the future of work can apply to the present. That is, I think, the way that the present of work will become the future of work.

I would be delighted to have the opportunity to discuss some of these ideas (as well as other related ideas) in more detail with other members of the community.

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