

## The “Human Revolution”: Is it a cause for concern or rally cry for purpose?

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In 2018 SAP SuccessFactors launched a marketing campaign entitled “The Human Revolution.” On one hand, I’m excited by the campaign’s emphasis on using human capital management (HCM) technology to transform the world of work. Technology innovations are enabling revolutionary changes in the nature of jobs and how they are performed. On the other hand, we have to understand the historical background when using the word “revolution” to describe these changes. It is true that jobs, economies, and societies are being radically changed due to the permeation of technology into almost every aspect of our lives. But will this digitalization lead to worker revolutions similar in scope to the ones that happened between 1900 and 1970? And if so, should we be excited or terrified?

The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed several revolutionary changes tied to work. The most well-known are the communist movements in Russia and China. In addition to communist revolutions whose goals were to completely replace established governments, there were many large-scale social movements focused on rethinking the design and economics of work. This includes the [International Workers of the World](#) and similar collective labor movements around the globe.

The revolutionary changes made to work in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were largely a reaction to the industrial revolution of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Technology developed during the industrial revolution fundamentally altered the nature of work. Complex craft jobs such as tailor, cobbler, or blacksmith were replaced by factory jobs where people performed narrow, specialized tasks. Many of these jobs were designed to take the skill out of work so workers largely became interchangeable. Societies also changed to ensure factories had a steady supply of labor to perform tasks that were frequently highly repetitive, boring, and dangerous. This resulted in economic conditions that forced people to move from sparsely populated rural villages to crowded and often squalid urban settings.

The industrial revolution vastly improved the prosperity and well-being of people on average. But these benefits were not shared equally across all segments of society. Benefits created for the upper half of society often came at a cost of considerable suffering for the lower “working classes.” This led to massive social unrest as workers demanded better treatment from employers. The subsequent workers’ revolutions that followed, along with the fear that these revolutions might spread to other nations, created other benefits such as outlawing the use of child labor, and ensuring workers were given safe work environments, living wages, and the right to take time from work without losing their jobs. But it was not a smooth transition, to say the least.

Are we now facing another era of revolution akin to what we went through 100 years ago? What we know for sure is that technology is once again fundamentally changing the nature of work. Digitalization is dividing the world into [two distinct labor markets](#). Highly skilled jobs that demand constant learning, and low skilled jobs that require little training and that are at constant risk of being automated. Workers performing high skilled jobs are likely to be in-demand and well-paid. Workers performing low skilled jobs are likely to be in surplus and have dismal career prospects. This growing gap between the “haves” and “have nots” is not a good formula for maintaining stable societies. But the nature of this change is also different from 100 years ago. The industrial revolution replaced complex craft jobs with more simplistic jobs focused on performing repetitive tasks. The digital revolution is having the opposite effect. Repetitive jobs are being automated and replaced by jobs that require learning new skills and capabilities. Consequently, job security in the digital economy is not about what you can do. It is about what you can learn to do.

Success in a digitalized world requires constant learning. Every person has the ability to learn, although we may learn at different speeds. But to learn effectively, people need three things: 1) access to knowledge, 2) time to learn, and 3) the right psychological conditions to enable effective learning. Access to knowledge has almost become a non-issue in the digital world. The problem is finding the right information and having time to digest it. This will require equipping employees with better tools to find information and ensuring jobs are structured to provide adequate time to process it.

The third element for effective learning is probably the most challenging. People are most effective at learning when they feel motivated, supported, and safe. Motivation grows as people see a link between what they are doing and things they value as important. This is about giving people a sense of purpose to their work. Feeling supported is about creating communities that encourage and enable learning. People do better when they are part of a group that appreciates and supports their contributions. Safety is about giving people confidence and security that they are cared for as people. It is about creating a community that values and supports the health and well-being of its members.

People can overcome all manner of challenges when they have a clear sense of purpose, feel part of a trusted team, and are secure that the health and well-being of themselves and loved ones will be provided for. How people react to changes depends largely on whether they are motivated, supported, and safe. When these conditions exist people see changes as opportunities for growth. When these things are missing people become disillusioned, depressed, anxious, and fearful. This makes it difficult for them to learn, and as a result change becomes a vicious circle of adversity, anxiety, and failure.

The disruptions caused by digitalization contain the elements needed to start a human revolution. But the 20<sup>th</sup> century clearly showed that not all revolutions focused around work are good. Whether the next human revolution creates more good than bad will depend on our ability to use technology to ensure people profit from change instead of being crushed by it. This starts by managing people in a way that supports effective learning. Specifically, making sure people get a sense of purpose from their work, feel connected to their colleagues, and feel secure and cared for by organizations and broader society overall.