

The Rise of Humans

In my last Column, Collaboration=Community, in November 2017, discussed how collaborative processes are fundamental to initiatives in which the third (community and voluntary) sector plays a significant part, and how the importance of such initiatives is set to increase dramatically in years to come. One reason cited there is the devolution of budgets and responsibility to local level worldwide. Another reason, which I will discuss here, is the impact of maturing automation technologies. Few jobs are now immune as robots advance beyond factory work.

Aspects of medicine, law, broking, banking, and teaching have been automated for a long time and the proportion will only increase. [A 2013 study by Oxford economists Carl Benedikt Frey and Michael Osborne](#) concluded it was a near certainty that human telemarketers, insurance underwriters, security guards and other fields would vanish, and even sports referees could be headed for the historical dust bin. A few years later, it is commonplace to read that self-driving vehicles will become the norm within a few years, and postal delivery will surely be automated not long after. But that is still only the start.

Robots have been [vacuuming](#) for a long time now and soon are bound to extend their duties to more general forms of cleaning. Robots are doing [municipal sanitation work](#). [Robot builders](#) are on construction sites in the US and coming to the UK. Sex workers are facing [competition from machines](#). [Robot cooks](#) are available on the market. In Japan and Germany robots are [working in nursing care](#). McDonalds shares hit an all-time high after announcing they were [replacing cashiers with robots](#) in 2500 restaurants, and Tesco is testing technology to [replace supermarket cashiers](#). So blue collar jobs are on the out. What about the others?

The Guardian lists [white collar jobs under threat](#) including middle management, advocates, journalists, therapists, teachers, actors, cookbook authors and hospitality staff. Even the creative industries are not immune. Software can not only [write short-form poetry](#) but [compete successfully in novel competitions](#) and [compose music](#). [A robot has spoken at the UN](#) (and answered questions).

Journalists generally strike the confident note that humans will still be needed alongside the machines. For example, the Guardian article referenced above claims:

“Instead of being replaced wholesale, most people in high-skill positions will likely find themselves working alongside their inanimate colleagues, not unlike the way we use computers instead of typewriters and calculators.”

[McKinsey helpfully provides a portal](#) showing when different types of job are likely to become obsolete in the US, which estimates that 60% of today's occupations have at

least some portion that can be automated – in other words, over 40% will remain human. But this conservative outlook is in stark contrast to that of some academics – most notably, Professor Yuval Noah Harari, historian at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who predicts in his bestselling book [Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow](#) that artificial intelligence will extend to every walk of life, forcing us to re-evaluate the fundamentals of human society. Whoever is right, a bet on humans retaining anything like their current roles in society would be given long odds right now.

So, what will everyone do all day? One possibility is that we will all start thinking more about how we can use our time for the good of others. Many people feel the need to be of value to society, and once robots have relieved us of the opportunity to produce anything, the best way to meet this need may be to reach out to those around us with an offer of practical, emotional, or spiritual help. Taking the UK as an example, [1 in 5 UK citizens](#) live in poverty and [1 in 200 UK citizens](#) are homeless. The charities that support this significant part of the population have a correspondingly huge need for volunteers. Even people without financial issues often struggle to cope as they get older, and by 2040 nearly [1 in 7 UK citizens](#) people will be aged over 75. Many of us will have elderly neighbours who appreciate assistance with household tasks that the robot struggles with, as well as a friendly conversation and a social trip out of the house every now and then.

In other words, the number of volunteers will increase radically, perhaps by an order of magnitude, which will make it necessary to organise their work in a structured way so as to reduce gaps and overlaps, and ensure that inputs deliver effective and efficient outputs. Many people will be keen to do voluntary work for the good of others but not know who to help or how best to do it, especially when dealing with complex needs such as safety, addiction, finance, housing, and mobility. Volunteers will need training, coaching, mentoring, and management – and while some of this will no doubt be done by robots, it may make more economic sense to let people keep at least this area of responsibility for themselves.

All these are human processes and they will be the new world of work. Connect and coordinate may replace command and control, recognition may replace reward, and Human Interactions may replace Scientific Management. Assuming (and it's a big assumption) that we can find a way to provide people who have no paid work with food, warmth, and shelter, to me this seems like a very optimistic vision. Happy New Year.

Author

Keith Harrison-Broninski is a writer, researcher, consultant, and software designer. He wrote "Human Interactions: The Heart And Soul Of Business Process Management" (2005), described by reviewers as "the overarching framework for 21st century business technology" and "a must read for Process Professionals and Systems Analysts alike". Keith founded Role Modellers (www.rolemodellers.com), a Gartner BPM Cool Vendor that provided the UK National Health Service with NHS GATHER, a cloud service for large-scale collaborative innovation in healthcare. Backed by the Royal Society of Arts, Role Modellers now provides local government with a cloud service, Town Digital Hub (www.towndigitalhub.info), that helps people make lifelong personal wellness plans.