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Building the future of work together

Not the end of work but a new idea of doing business

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International studies warn that all human jobs risk being replaced by machines. While overstated to hit the headlines, these predictions point to a real danger: the use of robots and state-of-the-art technology may substitute human beings. Therefore, the debate concerning “**the end of work**” is ongoing and features competing arguments. However, research from more authoritative sources indicates that in the future many jobs and trades will be taken over by robots. This will lead current labour markets to job polarisation, as a neat separation will arise between highly-skilled jobs, on the one hand, and low-skilled ones, on the other hand. To many, this will mark the end of the middle class that has made up the bulk of the workforce in industrialised countries in the post-war years.

The changes that have sparked today’s debate will also affect highly-skilled workers, because technology is now able to replace non-routine activities and even those occupations requiring social interaction (e.g. doctors, nurses, lawyers, cashiers, teachers and taxi drivers).

Besides describing the transformation underway, experts have also proposed a solution to deal with it: strengthening education. In this respect, many studies argue that more educated workers are less likely to see their jobs taken over by robots. Therefore, one should not fear for the future, but should be equipped with the right skills to face it. If this perspective is taken and neo-Luddism approaches are set aside, the focus will be on people again and on their role in the labour market.

Conversely, failing to provide these new skills will result in technology dominating work, enslaving humanity or affecting it greatly. This is not tantamount to saying that some professions will survive, as they are bound to disappear. However, if we think that in the first half of the XIX century, most jobs involved working as farm labourers, we can see that the fact that some occupations disappear does not prevent people from creating others. Of course, today we face an unprecedented challenge, because economic and welfare systems fail to keep up with the rapid pace of technological innovation.

Yet “new skills” does not refer only to technical ones. Nowadays, many professions require individuals to be fully prepared and gain qualifications other than those needed to carry out a job. For this reason, a comprehensive form of education is the one that prioritises the central role of individuals, their interaction with others and the world of work and that lies at the heart of the creativity needed to master new technologies.

According to a recent document by the World Economic Forum, it is up to society, politics and industry to accept and develop the opportunities opened up by technologies. Believing that all of this is possible only through new legal rules or predetermined techniques will not get us far. At some point, laws will gradually fail to keep pace with reality and techniques will become obsolete with time. In order to tackle the risks arising from automation, it is important to invest in skills and in workers’ creativity, without fear of allowing freedom for them to take the initiative. We have barely done so in Italy, as we erroneously thought it would be enough to implement some rules to simply change the economic and social scenario.

It is also important that trade unions and employers’ associations support workers’ efforts and ideas in order not to be overwhelmed by this transformation but to take on the challenges of the future of work.

This is not “the end of work”, then, but the rise of a new idea of business as social formation where positive relations are created through a collaborative spirit and people-oriented organisational models.