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Building the future of work together

The time has come to set work free and embrace hybridisation

By Denis Pennel

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We live in an era of hybridisation. The once clear demarcation between buyers and sellers, workers and employers, global and local are now being blurred and a new hybrid approach is emerging in many areas of life. Consumers are now taking on the role of activists and advocates; and organisations that are fierce competitors are now also joining forces and collaborating in order to open up new markets. These days even our cars are multi-tasking – powered by both fuel and electric motors while our restaurants long ago embraced hybridism and are serving fusion food that mixes cuisines from around the world.

Inevitably, the world of work has not escaped this hybridisation. The lines between our private and professional lives are becoming ever more fluid as the rise in technology has made the separation between home and office increasingly irrelevant. Nowadays we respond to emails while at home in the evening and we conduct our online banking in the office during the day. Business and leisure now overlap in a phenomenon which some are calling ‘bleisure’.

In the labour market a new generation of ‘slashers’ is emerging as people combine numerous activities at the same time. One track careers are giving way to portfolio working as individuals enjoy a hybrid set of skills and jobs – eg. IT specialist by day/yoga teacher by night.

The area in which hybridisation is most marked is in the area of labour contracts. The old delineations between salaried worker, part-time worker, independent worker are being replaced by a host of new forms of employment that constitute a hybrid between salaried and independent employment and between permanent and temporary work.

Countries around the world are responding to this new hybrid reality and creating new types of contracts. Italy for example has introduced a third type of worker status; Spain has established a

contract for independent workers who are economically dependent; Germany meanwhile has introduced a quasi-salaried contract which is somewhere between a salaried worker and an independent worker. A significant grey zone now exists between salaried and independent workers – and one where there are many more than 50 shades.

In effect, work today has become genetically modified and is not always easy to classify. Workers in the gig economy personify this paradox. Are they employed by the digital platforms for whom they work and to whom they are subordinate, or are they independent entrepreneurs with control of when and how they work?

Whatever the answer, we need to recognise that today's labour market has become multiple and diverse. Attempting to promote one, single form of work as preferable just doesn't make sense anymore. Both companies and workers have a wide variety of different needs and the labour market must reinvent itself in order to reconcile often contradictory expectations on both sides between freedom and security, flexibility and protection.

How to balance freedom with security – allowing people greater autonomy over their working lives while still protecting them from precarious work is a challenge that governments are going to have to address in the years to come. Reconciling the needs of an increasingly independent, dispersed and mobile workforce is a challenge for companies, workers and for organisations such as trade unions which represent them. We will need to accommodate a wide diversity of forms of work while also ensuring that people continue to have access to social rights and protections as they move from job to job and through a variety of different contracts and forms of employment.

One thing is clear: in today's increasingly complex, volatile and uncertain labour markets diversity is thriving. We must encourage it and at the same time find new, innovative solutions to secure social rights and protections and ensure that they can keep pace with the new reality.

Governments will need to overhaul social contracts to ensure that social rights and benefits including sick pay, holiday pay, pension rights, unemployment pay are portable and attached to the individual throughout his working life and into semi-retirement and retirement. We will need to create worker cooperatives that support hybrid work combinations relevant for 21st century labour markets - for example new forms of work that combine working and studying, or working and semi-retirement, or salaried work with independent work. We must also rethink minimum social benefits, insurance mechanisms and income replacement benefits so that they become applicable to this increasing number of different options.

To deliver this our whole benefits systems will need to be funded differently too - probably drawing on the broader taxation system to assure that everyone contributes and everyone is covered throughout their lives from education into work, through periods of unemployment and periods of retraining and finally into retirement. In short, a hybrid employment market will also require hybrid solutions.

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