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OPINION

A new design for work

We have diminished the human experience of delivering a service – whether it's healthcare or pizzas. The whole system needs a redesign, writes Nick de Leon



MUCH HAS BEEN written about the impact of robotics and artificial intelligence on the future of work, but how much thought has gone into designing the work experience itself? When re-engineering business processes and creating new organisations to deliver them, did anyone consider whether the jobs created would be rewarding and dignified? And will the impending revolution in work make the current experience better or worse, or just take many of our jobs away?

Service designers, who develop systems rather than tangible products, are well placed to address these questions. They are increasingly involved in designing public services, and the primacy of the customer experience is propelling private enterprises in every field to employ them. By

harnessing their approach, companies such as Netflix, Amazon, Facebook, Spotify, Uber and Airbnb have not only transformed their own sectors, but the way we live. At the same time, the transformation in how we communicate and consume media has amplified anger, which, in recent elections, has caught established political classes off guard. Much of this anger is rooted in the dignity of work and its rewards – or the lack of both. Soon it won't just be those lower down the social pecking order that will be affected: zero hours and short-term contracts, job insecurity and the degrading of work will be felt across the board. It is time to look seriously at the design of work.

Over the past 30 years, work has been transformed not only by technology

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but also by management practice. The 1980s was the era of Total Quality Management – a system based on continuous improvement. The 1990s heralded the arrival of 'lean' methodologies, which drew on the practices of manufacturing industries to prioritise efficiency and eliminate waste. The incorporation of these into the services sector ensured that, by the 2000s, tasks could be codified, sliced, 'componentised', outsourced and automated. Efficiency increased but often to the detriment of the experience. We squeezed craft and creativity out of work and replaced them with compliance, while the planning of work moved from the shop floor to a professional class of remote managers and consultants. ▶

IMAGE: SHONDERBOUCE / FLECKOR

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