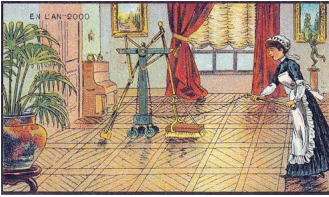


What happened to our promised leisure time? And will we find it in the smart city?

Written by Nick Falkner, Associate Professor and Director of the Australian Smart Cities Consortium, University of Adelaide



The floor scrubber of the year 2000, as seen from the 19th century, complete with attendant human. [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Whether it's [the use of Terminator imagery](#) , [visions of dystopia](#) , or [discussions of genomics](#) , it's common practice to use the metaphors and framing of speculative fiction to guide discussion into new and innovative areas.

A common theme is a world where humans do less work and machines do more. Why have we not yet reached that point?

I recently gave a talk on the implications of blockchain technologies for international trade. This technology can automate work that was manual and error-prone, bringing benefits with less human labour.

A colleague from another university reminded me afterwards that the promise of less work in the future was a mainstay of science fiction. Given my interests in smart city technologies, he asked, why did I think that we would finally see a real reduction in human work, as had been promised for so many years?

Further reading: [Creative city, smart city … whose city is it?](#)

Trend towards shorter weeks reversed



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~~to overwork. No, it's not you, it's the system. The answer is to work less and get the same amount of work done. If so, why now?~~
So what's different now?

Returning to my colleague's question, have we actually reached a point where we could work less and get the same amount of work done? If so, why now?

In the developed world, home appliances have greatly reduced the need for physical labour. Fewer people need to be involved in tasks that once left them little time to do much else.

For example, the word processor and email have, to a great extent, replaced the dedicated secretarial staff that briefly flourished with the rise of the typewriter. At one time all copies were made with manual scribes, carefully duplicating what they read. Then we had carbon paper. Then photocopiers. Then printers. Then the requirement for physical copy reduced.

An entire stream of labour appeared and disappeared as technology advanced. We freed ourselves of one kind of work; we just replaced it with another.

The rise of robotics has heralded a new model for labour: one where humans can be removed from the entirety of a task, beyond supervision or programming. But we know that we may not always want to do this. In India, Nitin Gadkari, the minister for road transport, highways and shipping, said:

We won't allow driverless cars in India. ... I am very clear on this. We won't allow any technology that takes away jobs.

India has 400 million workers, 12.5 million of them identified in [transport, storage and communication](#) industries.

Putting millions of people out of work is at odds with India's plans to increase the numbers in the workforce.

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So we have two reasons emerging for why we haven't seen the promised labour reductions. The first is our perceptions of working hours as proxy value of an employee. The second is that few governments want to cause widespread unemployment as this is then linked to social and economic issues.

But this is at odds with what we know about work: too much of it is bad for us and the job itself.

Working out the post-work economy

Until now, these answers have been enough because we didn't really have machines that could replace us. But that has changed in many areas. Planes can land themselves. Cars can drive themselves. Computer-controlled trains run in many subways and airports of the world.

In terms of transport, then, humans are rapidly becoming superfluous, except as passengers. And transport is only one example. We can now say "let someone else do it" and have that someone not be human.

We finally have the means to sensibly replace human labour, without forcing that work on to someone else. But this does not mean we can simply do that. We need to work out how to support people in a post-work economy.

We need to accurately identify which jobs machines can't do. We need to identify how we will be social without the accidental socialisation caused by the necessity of work.

We now live in the age predicted by science fiction. It's up to us whether we choose to give ourselves the leisure, or not.

Further reading: [*The new labour struggle: less work, same pay, and basic income for all*](#)

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