A World Without Work

By Derek Thompson
Photographs by Adam Levey
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For centuries, experts have predicted that machines would soon make workers obsolete. What if they weren’t wrong, but only premature? An exploration of what society without jobs might look like—and how we can prepare.

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By DEREK THOMPSON

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Youngstown, U.S.A.

The end of work is still just a futuristic concept for most of the United States, but it is something like a moment in history for Youngstown, Ohio, one of its residents can cite with precision: September 29, 1977.

For much of the 20th century, Youngstown’s steel mills delivered such great prosperity that the city was a model of the American dream, boasting a median income and a homeownership rate that were among the nation’s highest. But as manufacturing shifted abroad after World War II, Youngstown suffered, and on that gray September afternoon in 1977, Youngstown Sheet and Tube announced the shuttering of its Campbell Works mill. Within five years, the city lost 30,000 jobs and $1.5 billion in manufacturing wages. The effect was so severe that a term was coined to describe the fallout: regional depression.

Youngstown was transformed not only by an economic disruption but also by a psychological and cultural breakdown. Depression, spousal abuse, and suicide all became much more prevalent; the caseload of the area’s mental-health center tripled within a decade. The city built four prisons in the mid-1990s—a new growth industry. One of the few downtown construction projects of that period was a museum dedicated to the defunct steel industry.

This winter, I traveled to Ohio to consider what would happen if technology permanently replaced a great deal of human work. I wasn’t seeking a tour of our automated future. I went because Youngstown has become a national metaphor for the decline of labor, a place where the middle class of the 20th century has become a museum exhibit.
forward to machines’ workplace takeover with a kind of giddy excitement, imagining the banishment of drudgery and its replacement by expansive leisure and almost limitless personal freedom. And make no mistake if the capabilities of computers continue to multiply while the price of computing continues to decline, that will mean a great many of life’s necessities and luxuries will become ever cheaper, and it will mean great wealth—at least when aggregated up to the level of the national economy.

But even leaving aside questions of how to distribute that wealth, the widespread disappearance of work would usher in a social transformation unlike any we’ve seen. If John F. Kennedy is right, then saving work is more important than saving any particular job. Industrialization has served America’s unofficial religion since its founding. The sanctity and importance of work lie at the heart of the country’s politics, economics, and social interactions. What might happen if work goes away?

The U.S. labor force has been shaped by millennia of technological progress. Agriculture and industry, the automobile industry, the automobile industry, the automobile industry, and then globalization and automation are all back to work, giving rise to a nation of service jobs. Throughout these redefinitions, the total number of jobs has always increased. What may be looming is something different: an era of technological unemployment, in which computer scientists and software engineers essentially invent us out of work, and the total number of jobs declines steadily and permanently.

This fear is not new. The hopes that machines will free us from toil have always been tempered with the fear that they will rob us of our agency. In the midst of the Great Depression, the economist John Maynard Keynes foresaw that technological progress might allow a 6-hour workweek, and abundant leisure. By 2002, ‘that around the same time, President Herbert Hoover warned in a letter that industrial technology was a “Frankenstein monster” that threatened to upend manufacturing, “devouring our civilization.” The letter came from the mayor of Palo Alto, of all places.) In 2001, President John F. Kennedy said, “If men have the talents to invent new machines that put men out of work, they have the talents to put those same back to work.” A few years later, a committee of scientists and social activists sent an open letter to President F. Kennedy. Johnson argued that “the
cybernetics revolution” would create “a separate nation of the poor, the unskilled, the jobless,” who would be unable to find work or afford life’s necessities. The job market defied doomsayers in those earlier times, and according to the most frequently reported jobs numbers, it has so far done the same in our own time. Unemployment is currently just over 7 percent, and 2014 was the company’s best year for job growth. One could be forgiven for saying that recent predictions about technological job displacement are merely repeating the latest chapter in a long story called “The Day the Cattle Rabble” — one in which the robots, unlike the wolves, never appear in the end. The end-of-work argument has often been dismissed as the “luddite fallacy,” an allusion to the 19th-century British luddites who smashed textile-making machines at the dawn of the industrial revolution, fearing the machines would put hand-weavers out of work. Not some of the most sober economists are beginning to worry that the luddites weren’t wrong, just premature. When former Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers was an MIT undergraduate in the early 1970s, many economists declared “the stupid people [he] thought that automation was going to make all the jobs go away,” he said at the National Bureau of Economic Research Summer Institute in July 2013. “Until a few years ago, I didn’t think this was a very complicated subject: the luddites were wrong, and all the economists in technology and technological progress were right. I’m not so completely certain.”

**Reasons to Cry Robot**

What does the “end of work” mean, exactly? It does mean the creation of total unemployment, nor is the United States remotely likely to face, say, 30or 50percent unemployment — at least not for the next decade. Rather, technology could exert a slow but continual downward pressure on the value and distribution of labor, that is, on the share of prime-age workers with full-time jobs. Eventually, by degrees, that could create a new normal where the expectation that work will be a central feature of adult life disappears for a significant portion of society.

After 500 years of people crying wolf, there are now three broad reasons to take seriously the argument that the beast is at hand: First, the ongoing expropriation of capital over labor; the quiet demise of the working man, and the impressive descent of information technology.

**Labor’s losses.** One of the first things we might expect to see is the effects of technological displacement in the diminution of human labor as a driver of economic growth. In fact, that this is happening has been present for quite some time. The share of U.S. economic output that is paid out in wages fell mainly in the 1970s, reversed some of its losses in the 1990s, and then continued falling after 2000, accelerating during the Great Recession. It now stands at its lowest level since the government started keeping track in the mid-20th century.

A number of theories have been advanced to explain this phenomenon, including globalization and its accompanying loss of bargaining power for some workers. But Leahy Kishanpaul and Mark Berman, economists at the University of Chicago, have estimated that almost half of the decline is the result of “businesses replacing workers with computers and software.” In 1964, the nation’s most valuable company, AT&T, was worth $8 billion in today’s dollars and employed 76,664 people. Today’s telecommunications giant, Google, is worth $350 billion but has only about 35,000 employees — less than a seventh the size of AT&T’s workforce in its heyday.

“The spread of offshoring and unemployment yield,” says the share of prime-age American workers (25 to 54 years old) who are working has been declining since 2000. Attention, then, the decline began even earlier, the share of prime-age men who are either working or looking for work has doubled since the late 1970s, and has increased as much throughout the recovery as it did during the Great Recession itself. All is, about one in six prime-age men today are either unemployed or out of the workforce altogether. This is what the economist Tyler Cowen calls “the broken life.”

Despite the spread of automation and unemployment, the share of prime-age American workers over 25 years old who are working has been declining since 2000. In 1964, the nation’s most valuable company, AT&T, was worth $8 billion in today’s dollars and employed 76,664 people. Today’s telecommunications giant, Google, is worth $350 billion but has only about 35,000 employees — less than a seventh the size of AT&T’s workforce in its heyday.

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The arrival of the Machine Age, computers are so dehumanizing that projection dating back 50 years from now is almost impossible. Who could have guessed in 2039, two years before the machine was released, that smartphones would threaten jobs within the decade, by helping homeowners rent not their apartments and houses to strangers on Airbnb or that the company behind the most popular search engine would design self-driving cars that could threaten driving, the most common job occupation among American men? In 2039, Oxford University researchers forecast that computers might be able to perform half of all U.S. jobs in the next two decades. The projection was accurate, but in at least a few cases, it probably didn't go far enough. For example, the authors noted psychologist as one of the occupations least likely to be "automatable." But some research suggests that people are more honest in therapy sessions when they believe they are consulting their troubles to a computer, because a machine can't pass moral judgment. Google and WebMD already may be answering questions once reserved for one's closest friend. This doesn't prove that psychologists are going the way of the textile worker. Rather, it shows how easily computers can encroach on areas previously considered "for humans only."

After 100 years of breathtaking innovation, people aren't massively unemployed or indentured by machines, nor is it obvious how this could change, some economists have pointed to the defining career of the second-most-important species in U.S. economic history: the horse.

For many centuries, people created technologies that made the horse more productive and more valuable—like plows for agriculture and swords for battle. One might have assumed that the remaining advance of complementary technologies would make the animal even more essential to farming and fighting, historically perhaps the two most consequential human activities. Instead came inventions that made the horse obsolete—the tractor, the car, and the tank. After tractors rolled onto American farms in the early 20th century, the population of horses and mules began to decline steeply, falling nearly 30 percent by the 1950s and 40 percent by the 1990s.

Humans do much more than till, carry, and pull, but the skills required in most offices hardly fit our full range of intelligence. Most jobs are still boring, repetitive, and easily learned. The most common occupations in the United States are retail salespeople, cashiers, food and beverage servers, and office clerks. Together, these four jobs employ 14 million people—nearly 20 percent of the labor force, or more workers than there are in Texas and Massachusetts combined. Each is highly susceptible to automation, according to an Oxford study.

Technology creates some jobs too, but the creative half of creative destruction is easily overstated. Nine out of 10 workers today are in occupations that existed 100 years ago, and 97 percent of the new jobs generated between 1995 and 2011 came from "high-tech" sectors like computing, software, and telecommunications. Our newest industries tend to be the most labor- intensive (they just don't require many people. It is for precisely this reason that the economic historian Robert Alford, comparing the exponential growth in computing power with the less-than-exponential growth in job complexity, has said, "In order to learn, we will run out of jobs."

Is that certain—or certainly impossible? No. The signs are muddled and suggestive. The most fundamental and wrenching job uncertainties and contradictions seem apparent when we look more carefully at the next couple of decades. But the possibility seems significant enough—and the consequences disruptive enough—that we owe it to ourselves to start thinking about what society could look like without universal work, in an effort to begin nudging it toward the better outcomes and away from the worse ones.

To paraphrase the science-fiction novelist William Gibson, there are, perhaps, fragments of the post-work future distributed throughout the present. I see three overlapping
possibilities as formal employment opportunities decline. Some people displaced from the formal workforce will devote their freedom to simple pleasures, some will seek to build productive communities outside the workplace; and others will fight, passionately and in many cases brutally, to reclaim their productivity by piecing together jobs in an informal economy. These are figures of consumption, communal creativity, and exigency. In any combination, it is almost certain that the country would have to embrace a radical new role for government.

Consumption: The Paradox of Leisure

Work is really three things, says Peter Uebele, the author of Poor Future, a forthcoming book about how automation will change America: the means by which people earn income, and an activity that lends meaning or purpose to many people’s lives. We tend to confl ate these things," he told me, "because today we need to pay people to keep the lights on, to speak. But in a future of abundance, you wouldn’t, and we ought to think about ways to make it easier and better to not be employed."

The world belongs to a small group of visionaries, academics, and economists—they have been called "post-workers"—who welcome, even root for, the end of labor. American society has "an irrational belief in work for work’s sake," says Benjamin Fractuclt, another post-worker and a historian at the University of Iowa, even though most jobs aren’t so fulfilling. A 2004 Gallup report of worker satisfaction found that as many as 20 percent of Americans don’t feel engaged by their current job. Fractuclt told me that if a car dealer were a video game—grab an item, find the bar code, scan it, slide the item onward, and repeat—their video game might call it "mindless. But when it’s a job, politicians praise its intrinsic dignity. "Purpose, meaning, identity, fulfillment, creativity, autonomy—all these things that positive psychology has shown us to be necessary for well-being are absent in the average job," he said.

The post-workers are certainly right about some important things. Paid labor does not always map to social good. Raising children and caring for the sick is essential work, and these jobs are underpaid poorly to an extent. In a post-work society, Fractuclt said, people might spend more time caring for their families and neighbors, pride could come from our relationships rather than from our careers.

The post-workers acknowledge that, even in the best post-work scenarios, pride and personal self-worth, because reputation will always be scarce, even in an economy of abundance. But with the right government provision, they believe, the end of wage work would allow for a golden age of well-being. Fractuclt said he thinks colleges could transform as cultural centers rather than job prep institutions. The world itself, he pointed out, comes from the Greek word "for design." We need to teach people to be free," he said. "Now we teach them to work."

Fractuclt’s vision of self-sufficiency is a utopian vision about taxation and redistribution that might not be compatible in many Americas today. But even leaving that aside for the moment, this vision is problematic: it doesn’t resemble the world as it is currently experienced by most people. By and large, the jobless don’t spend their downtime socializing with friends or taking group hobbies. Instead, they watch TV or sleep. Time-use surveys show that jobless prime-age people dedicate some of the time once spent working to cleaning and childcare. But many interviewees (nearly most of their time is leisure), the Ion’s share of which spent watching television, browsing the internet, and sleeping, felt less happy than before hours of television a week, according to Nielsen. That means they spend a majority of their time either sleeping or sitting on the sofa looking at a flat-screen. The unemployed theorectically have the most time to socialize, and yet studies have shown that they feel the most social isolation. It is surprisingly hard
to replace the camaraderie of the water cooler.

Most people want to work, and are miserable when they can’t. The idea of unemployment goes well beyond the loss of income people who lose their jobs are more likely to suffer from mental and physical ailments. “There is a loss of status, a sense of uselessness that is very psychological,” says Janet Kagan, a public health professor at UC Berkeley. Research has shown that it is harder to recover from a long bout of unemployment than from losing a low-wage job or suffering a life-threatening injury. The very things that help many people recover from other emotional traumas— alcohol, an absorbing distraction, a daily purpose—are not readily available to the unemployed.

The transition from labor force to leisure force would likely be particularly hard on Americans, the worker bees of the rich world. Between 1992 and 2010, annual hours worked per worker fell significantly throughout Europe—by about 20 percent in Germany and the Netherlands—but by only 10 percent in the United States. Either, college-educated Americans are working more hours than they did 20 years ago, particularly when you count time working and answering e-mail at home.

In 1993, the psychologists Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Judith LeFever conducted a famous study of Chicago workers that of people who work alone often feel they are somewhere else, and in questionnaires, these people reported feeling better and less anxious in the office or at the plant than they did elsewhere. The two psychologists called this “the paradox of work.” Many people are happier complaining about jobs than they are haranguing in too much leisure. Other researchers have used the term “apathy to describe the people who use media to relax but often feel worldless when they reflect on their unproductive downtime. Commitment speaks in the present tense, but something more— pride—comes only in reflection past accomplishments.

The post-World War II culture of Americans work so hard because their culture has conditioned them to feel guilty when they are not working. As an active person who has been a successful industrialist, I have seen that guilt is a powerful motivator. People who feel guilty about work are the ones who are most likely to succeed. They are the ones who are constantly striving to achieve more. They are the ones who are constantly striving to be better. They are the ones who are constantly striving to be the best.

Less passive and more nourishing forms of mass leisure could develop. Arguably, they already are developing. The informal, social media, and entertainment that are as easy to slip into as is watching TV, but are more purposeful and less isolating. Video games, despite the debates about them, are vehicles for achievement of a sort. Jeremy Madeoff, a communications professor at Stanford, says that as virtual-reality technology improves, people’s “video-existence” will become as rich and social as their “real” life. Games in which users climb into another person’s skin to embody his or her experiences firsthand don’t just let people live out their fantasies, he has argued, but also help you live as someone else to touch you empathy and pro-social skills.

But it’s hard to imagine that leisure could ever entirely fill the vacuum of accomplishment left by the demise of labor. What people do to achieve things through, yes, sweat to a lasting sense of purpose. To envision a future that offers more than minutes in minutes satisfaction, we have to imagine how millions of people might find meaningful work without formal wages. So, inspired by the predictions of one of America’s most famous labor economists, I took a detour on my way to Tucson and stopped in Columbus, Ohio.

Communal Creativity: The Artisans’ Revenge

Artisans make up the original American middle class. Before industrialization swept through the U.S. economy, many people who didn’t work on farms were silversmiths, blacksmiths, or woodworkers. These artisans were brought up by the machinery of mass production in the 19th century. The Lumbermen, today’s labor economists at Harvard, see the next wave of automation returning us to an age of craftsmanship and artistry. In particular, he looks forward to the ramifications of 3D printing, whereby machines construct complex objects from digital designs.

The factories that arose more than a century ago “would make Model T’s and bridges and bridges and glasses in a standardized, cheap way, and that drove the artisan out of business,” Katz told me. “What if the new tech, like 3D printing machines, can do customized things that are almost as cheap? It’s possible that information technology and robots eliminate traditional jobs and make possible a new artisan economy, an economy geared toward self-expression, where people would do artistic things with their time.”

In other words, it would be a future not of consumption but of creativity, as technology allows the tools of the assembly line to individuals, democratizing the means of mass production.

Something like this future is already present in the small but growing number of industrial shops called “makerspaces” that have popped up in the United States and around the world. The lumbermen like the idea of the country’s largest such space, a cavernous converted shoe factory stocked with industrial-age machinery. Several hundred members pay a monthly fee to use its arsenal of machines to make gifts and jewelry, weld, solder, and print play with plastic cutters and work an angle grinder or operate a lathe with a machinist.
When I arrived there on a bitterly cold afternoon in February, a chalkboard standing on an easel by the door displayed three names, pointing toward umbrellas, Rover's corner, and zombies. Near the entrance, three men with black fingernails and grease-stained shirts took turns fixing a 40-year-old metal-turning lathe. Behind them, a resident artist was teaching an older woman how to transfer her photographs onto a large canvas, while a couple of guys fed pizza pies into a computerized broiler oven. Meanwhile, men in protective goggles welded a sign for a local chicken restaurant, while others munched codes into a computer-controlled laser-cutting machine. Beneath the din of drilling and woodcutting, a Pandora radio station hummed softly from a Wi-Fi-connected NAD phonograph horn. The foundry is not just a gymnasium of tools; it is a social center.

Alex Bandar, who started the foundry after receiving a degree in materials science and engineering, has a theory about the rhythms of invention in American history. Over the past century, he told me, the economy has moved from hardware to software, from atoms to bits, and people have spent more time at work in front of screens. But as computers take over more tasks previously considered the province of humans, the pendulum will swing back from bits to atoms, at least when it comes to how people spend their days. Bandar thinks that digitally preoccupied society will come to appreciate the raw and distinct pleasures of making things one can touch. "I've always wanted to be in a new era of technology where people do not have to do it," he said. "If you have better batteries, better robotics, more dexterous manipulation, then it's not a far stretch to say people do most of the work. So what do we do? Play? Own? Actually talk to each other again?"

You don't need any particular fondness for plasma cutters to see the beauty of an economy where tens of millions of people make things they enjoy making—whether physical or digital, in buildings or online communities—and receive feedback and appreciation for their work. The internet and the cheap availability of artistic tools have already empowered millions of people to produce culture from their living rooms. People upload more than 24 hours of YouTube videos and 50 million new Facebook photos every day. The demise of the formal economy could lead many to believe that artists, writers, and craftspersons to dedicate their time to creating—no one to market what they produce. Such activities offer a sense that many organizational psychologists consider important to satisfaction at work: independence, the chance to develop mastery, and a sense of purpose.

After leaving the foundry, I sat at a long table with several members, sharing the pizza that had come out of the communal oven. I asked them what they thought of their organization as a model for a future where automation touched far more than the formal economy. A mixed-media artist named Kate Morgan said that most people she knew at the foundry would quit their jobs and use the foundry to start their own business if they could. Others spoke about the fundamental need to witness the outcome of one's work, which was satisfied more deeply by craftsmanship than by other jobs they'd held. In the conversation, we were joined by Terry Grissler, an engineer who had built miniature steam engines in his garage before Bandar invited him to join the foundry. His fingers were covered in soot, and he told me about the pride he had in his ability to fix things. "I've been working since I was 12; I've done food service, restaurant work, hospital work, and computer programming. I've done a lot of different jobs," said Grissler, who is now a divorced father. "But if we had a society that said, 'We'll cover your essentials, you can work in the shop,' I think that would be great. That, to me, would be the best of all possible worlds."

Contingency: "You're on Your Own"

One mile to the east of downtown Portsmouth, in a brick building surrounded by several empty lots, is Royal Oak, an iconic blue-collar bar. At about 4:30 p.m. on a Wednesday, the place was nearly full. The bar glowed yellow and green from the lights mounted along a wall. Old beer signs, trophies, masks, and marionettes cluttered the back corner of the main room, like party leftovers stuffed in an attic. The scene was mostly middle-aged men, some in groups, talking loudly about baseball and...
A few years ago, a bartender named Sarah Woodruff, who had returned to her hometown of Youngstown, Ohio, after completing her education, noticed a change in the city. Youngstown, once a thriving industrial town, had been hit hard by deindustrialization, and many of its residents were struggling to make ends meet. Sarah saw the pain and suffering in the faces of her neighbors, and she decided to do something about it.

Sarah, along with a group of friends and neighbors, started a community garden in an abandoned lot. They called it the "Urban Garden," and it quickly became a hub of activity and hope. People from all walks of life came together to plant and tend to the garden, bringing a sense of purpose and pride to those who had felt forgotten.

As the garden grew, so did the community around it. People started to gather at the garden for potlucks, workshops, and even small concerts. The garden became a symbol of resilience and innovation in a city that had seen better days.

Sarah and her friends also started a local cooperative, known as "The Collective," which provided jobs and training for residents who were struggling to find work. The Collective offered services like food delivery, home improvement, and even a training program for young people interested in becoming urban farmers.

The success of the Urban Garden and The Collective inspired similar initiatives across Youngstown. The city, once known for its steel mills and factories, was now a hub of innovation and community spirit. People were proud to be part of a place where they could work together to build a better future.

Sarah and her friends were proud of what they had accomplished, but they knew there was still work to be done. Youngstown, like many other cities, was facing challenges, but they were determined to meet them head-on. They were building a new narrative for their city, one of hope, resilience, and community.

As Sarah looked out over her garden, she smiled. "Youngstown is more than just a place," she said. "It's a community of people who care for each other and are willing to work together to make life better for everyone."

And that, in a nutshell, was the story of Youngstown - a city that, despite its struggles, was determined to rise above them and create a brighter future.
since 2020, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Some of these services, too, could be upscaled, eventually, by machines. But on-demand apps also spread the work around by carving up jobs, like driving a taxi, into hundreds of little tasks, like a single drive, which allows more people to compete for smaller pieces of work. These new arrangements are already challenging the legal definitions of employer and employee, and there are many reasons to be antiviolent about them. But if the future involves a declining number of full-time jobs, as in Youngstown, then splitting some of the remaining work up among many part-time workers, instead of a few full-timers, wouldn’t necessarily be a bad development. We shouldn’t be too quick to encourage companies that let people combine their work, art, and leisure in whatever way they choose. Today the norm is to think about employment and unemployment as a black-and-white binary, rather than two points at opposite ends of a wide spectrum of working arrangements. As late as the mid-20th century, through, the modern concept of "unemployment" didn’t exist in the United States. Most people lived on farms, and while paid work was rare, home industry—canning, sewing, carpentry—was a constant. Even in the worst economic periods, people typically found some productive things to do. The inaccessibility and helplessness of unemployment were discovered, to the detriment and dismay of cultural critics, only after factory work became dominant and cities swelled. The 20th century, if it presents fewer full-time jobs in the sectors that can be automated, could in this respect come to resemble the mid-19th century: an economy marked by episodic work across a range of activities, the loss of any one of which would not make somebody suddenly idle. Many believe that contingent gig economy platforms like these additional extra instead of a large loss of security. But some might thrive in a market where versatility and resilience were revalued: where there are, as in Youngstown, few jobs to have, yet many things to do.

The next wave of automation could return us to an age of craftsmanship and artistry.

Today, many working parents worry that they spend too many hours at the office. As full-time work declined, many children could become too overworked. And because job opportunities historically have spurred migration in the United States, we might see less of the diaspora of extended families could give way to more closely knit claims. But if men and women lost their purpose and dignity at work away, these families would nevertheless be troubled. The decline of the labor force would make our politics more contentious. Deciding how to tax profits and distribute income could become the most significant economic-policy debate in American history. In The Wealth of Nations, Adam Smith used the term invisible hand to refer to the order and social benefits that arise, surprisingly, from individuals’ selfish actions, but to preserve the consumer economy and the social fabric, governments might have to embrace what Jaimie Kuroki, the governor of the Bank of Japan, has called the visible hand of economic intervention. What follows is an early sketch of how it all might work.

In the near term, local governments might work to create more and more ambitious community centers in other public spaces where residents can meet, learn skills, bond around sports or crafts, and socialize. Two of the most common side effects of unemployment are loneliness, on the individual level, and the following out of community pride. A national policy that directed money toward centers in distressed areas might remedy the maladies of isolation, and form the beginnings of long-term experiment on how to engage people in
their neighborhoods in the absence of full employment, we could also make it easier for people to start their own small-scale and even part-time businesses. New-business formation has declined in the past few decades in all 50 states. One way to nurture fledgling ideas would be to build out a network of business incubators. Youngstown offers an unexpected model: its business incubator has been recognized internationally, and its success has brought new hope to West Federal Street, the city’s main drag.

Near the beginning of any broad decline in job availability, the United States might take a lesson from Germany on job-sharing. The German government gives firms incentives to cut all their workers’ hours rather than lay off some of them during hard times. It also pays people to work only 40 percent of their normal hours by 40 percent, which helps workers at established firms keep their attachment to the labor force despite the declining amount of overall labor.

Spreading work in this way has limits. Some jobs can’t be easily shared, and in any case, sharing jobs wouldn’t stop layoffs from shrinking; it would only slow the decline. Eventually, Washington would have to somehow spread wealth, too.

**Will big cities make sense if their role as sophisticated labor ecosystems is diminished?**

One way of doing that would be to more heavily tax the growing share of income going to the owners of capital, and use the money to cut checks to all adults. This idea—called the “universal basic income”—has received bipartisan support in the past. Many experts currently support it, and in 1996, Richard Thaler and the conservative economistilton Friedman proposed a version of the idea. That history notwithstanding, the politics of universal income in a world without universal work would be daunting. The rich could say, with some accuracy, that their hard work was subsidizing the idleness of millions of “takers.” What’s more, although a universal income might replace lost wages, it would do little to preserve the social benefits of work.

The most direct solution to the latter problem would be for government to pay people to do something, rather than nothing. Although this sounds like an idea that might be adopted by the European Union, it’s a model that might do the most to preserve virtues such as responsibility, agency, and industriousness. In the 1930s, the Works Progress Administration did more than rebuild the nation’s infrastructure. It hired 400,000 artists and other cultural workers to produce music and theater, murals and paintings, and surveys of state records. It’s not impossible to imagine something like the WPA—or an even more expansive—facing the post-work future.

What might that look like? Several national projects might partly direct the flow of public spending for a rising population of older people. If the balance of work continues to shift toward the small and the informal, the simplest way to help everybody stay busy might be government sponsorship of a nationwide marketplace for work or, alternatively, a series of local ones, sponsored by local governments. Individuals could browse for large long-term projects, like cleaning up after a natural disaster, or small short-term ones; an hour of working, an evening of entertainment, an art commission. The requests could come from local governments or community associations or nonprofit groups from rich (and wealthy) and poor (or rich) communities of all kinds. Each one could “spend” the on-site funds to pay adults a flat rate in return for some minimum level of activity on the site, but people could always earn more by taking on more gigs.

Although a digital WPA might strike some people as a strange anachronism, it would be similar to a randomized version of the Mechanical Turk, the popular Amazon site where individuals and companies post projects of varying complexity while so-called turkers do the work.

A government marketplace might likewise specialize in those tasks that required empathy, humanity, or a personal touch. By connecting millions of people in one central hub, it might even permit what the technology writer Robin Shab has called a “Cambodian explosion of microscale creative and intellectual ventures, a generation of Wikipedia-scale projects that can ask their users for even deeper commitments.”

**There’s a case to be made for using the tools of government to provide other incentives as well, to help people avoid the typical traps of worklessness and build rich lives and vibrant communities.** After all, the structure of the labor market in the 1930s might have been more generous, and there is an innate love of labor-saving or labor-saving. Mastering these skills requires discipline: discipline requires an education; and an education, for many people, implies the expectation that hours of often frustrating practice will eventually prove rewarding. In a post-work society, the financial rewards of education and training won’t be as obvious. This is a singular challenge of imagining a flourishing post-work society: how will people discover their talents, or the rewards that come from expertise, when they no longer work even for a share of the pie?

Most paid internships for young people for attending and completing college, skills training programs, or community center workshops might eventually be worth considering.
in people’s lives (communities separate from
their homes and offices could become central to growing up, learning new skills, discovering passions. And with or without new places, many people will need to embrace the resourcefulness learned over time by cities like Youngstown, which, even if they seem like museum exhibits of an old economy, might forecast the future for many more places in the next 15 years.

On my last day in Youngstown, I met with Howard Joks, a 41-year-old Youngstown State graduate student, at a burger joint along the main street. A few months after Black Friday in 1973, as a senior at Ohio State University, Joks received a phone call from his father, a specialty hose manufacturer near Youngstown. “Don’t bother coming back here for a job,” his dad said. “There aren’t going to be any left.” Then last, Joks returned to Youngstown in work, but he recently quit the job selling products like wire inspecting systems to construction companies; his customers had been devastated by the Great Recession and weren’t buying much anymore. Around the same time, a left-knee replacement due to degenerative arthritis resulted in a 30-day hospital stay, which gave him time to think about the future. Joks decided to go back to school to become a professor. “My true calling,” he told me, “has always been to teach.”

One theory of work holds that people tend to see themselves in jobs, careers, or callings. Individuals who say their work is “just a job” emphasize that they are working for money rather than aligning themselves with any higher purpose. Those with pure callings believe their interests are focused not only on income but also on the activities that they enjoy. For the growing number of their peers, but not necessarily a calling not only for pay or status, but also for the intrinsic fulfillment of the work itself.

When I think about the role that work plays in people’s self-esteem—particularly in America, given the prospect of a no-work future seems hopeful—then no one universal basic income that can prevent the civic ruin of a country built on a handful of workers permanently subsidizing the incomes of tens of millions of people. But if a future of no work still holds a glint of hope, because the necessity of salaried work now prevents so many from seeking interesting activities that they enjoy.

After my conversation with Joks, I headed back to my car to drive out of Youngstown. I thought about Joks’s life as it might have been had Youngstown’s steel mills never gone way to a steel mill. The city continued to provide stable, predictable careers to its residents. If Joks had taken a job in the steel industry, he might be preparing for retirement today, instead, the industry collapsed and then years later, another recession struck. The outcome of this cumulative grief is that Howard Joks is not sitting at his job. Getting his master’s degree to become a teacher. It took the loss of so many jobs to force him to pursue the work he always wanted to do.

Derek Thompson is a senior editor at The Atlantic.