

# Re-visioning the Future of Work: Towards a New Mindset

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## Introduction

There are many competing visions of the future of work. For some, the future of work is rosy, for others full of despair. For some, radical changes are occurring, for others, the future will be much like the present. Some visions are written as scientifically rigorous descriptions, others as prescriptions of what ought to be.

With this cacophony of competing voices and styles of writing, one might think that somebody would have reviewed the multitude of claims about the future of work, not least so that those new to this subject could gain an overarching appreciation of it. Until now, however, those reviewing competing visions (*Nolan and Wood, 2003; Ransome, 1999; Thompson and Warhurst, 1998; White et al, 2004*) have confined themselves to particular continents of thought. The result is that those seeking a global picture of the full range of visions have been left marooned with no compass.

The intention here, therefore, is to provide a more comprehensive tour of the multiple perspectives and in doing so to advance thinking about the future of work. To do this, firstly, the dominant narratives are set out, secondly some alternative counter visions

and thirdly, some prominent visions of the future of formal employment. This will reveal that although multifarious stories are told, a similar storyline is adopted across nearly all visions which will need to be transcended to advance understanding. The paper concludes by exploring how this might be accomplished.

## Dominant Visions of the Direction of Work

The starting point of this paper is that although multiple stories exist about the future of work, the storyline is often remarkably similar. Consider the following dominant narratives:

- Products and services are increasingly being produced and delivered by people in formal jobs meaning that informal work is disappearing (the ‘formalization’ of work thesis);
- Capitalism is permeating ever wider and deeper into every facet of life (the ‘commodification’ thesis);
- There is emerging an open world economy with businesses increasingly operating in a de-regulated seamless global market-place (i.e., the ‘globalization’ thesis) as regulated national economies disappear;
- Industrial society is being replaced by post-industrial societies



(i.e., the ‘post-industrialism’ thesis);

- Post-Fordist flexible work practices are replacing Fordist mass production (i.e., the ‘post-Fordism’ thesis); and
- Post-bureaucratic work organization is steadily replacing bureaucratic work organization (i.e., the ‘post-bureaucracy’ thesis).

What is the common storyline across these visions? The first step in all of these visions is that they marshal economic life into one side or the other of some dichotomy deemed essential for understanding the direction of work (e.g., informal and formal work; non-commodified and commodified work; bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy; Fordism and post-Fordism). Second, having squeezed all of economic life into one side or the other of this dualism, the two sides are then ordered into a temporal and normative sequence in which one side is seen as universally replacing and/or more progressive than the other. Third and finally, to depict this

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one-dimensional linear trajectory, a label is created usually involving some ‘-ation’ (e.g., formalization, globalization, commodification), ‘-ism’ (e.g., post-industrialism, informationalism) or ‘post-something-or-other’ (e.g., post-capitalism, post-Fordism, post-bureaucracy).

This storyline or narrative structure is very popular. It is used in most of the best-selling ‘pop-futurism’ of management gurus and also much serious academic writing. Largely, this is because it is a very powerful device. To see its persuasiveness, one has only to consider how many of the above storylines are often taken to be facts or descriptions about the future of work, as if such a thing could exist.

Three narratives in particular dominate most visions of the future at the present historical juncture. Firstly, the future of work is popularly to involve an on-going ‘formalization’ of work in the sense that goods and services are increasingly produced and delivered through the formal sphere rather than in the informal sphere (termed the ‘formalization’ thesis). Secondly, this formal production and delivery of goods and services is depicted as increasingly occurring through the market sector by capitalist firms for the purpose of profit (termed as the ‘commodification’ thesis). Third and finally, this formalization and commodification of work is seen to be increasingly taking place with an open (de-regulated) world economy (i.e., the globalization thesis).

Perhaps because all three narratives are widely accepted as accurate accounts of the direction of change, evidence is seldom provided to corroborate them. Take, for example, the formalization of work thesis; despite the belief that formalization is natural and inevitable, there is little evidence of its universality. Indeed, in

most global regions, a large proportion of work occurs in the informal economy: some 48 percent of non-agricultural employment in North Africa, 51 percent in Latin America, 65 percent in Asia and 72 percent in sub-Saharan Africa (ILO, 2002). Nor is this work declining as assumed in the formalisation thesis. Instead, heterogeneous development paths can be identified. As Table 1 reveals, even in the so-called ‘advanced’ western economies, although some nations have witnessed formaliza-

tion, others have witnessed an informalization of working life over the past four decades. Examining the evidence, therefore, strong doubts begin to be cast regarding this supposedly immutable fact

**Table 1: Unpaid Work as a % of Total Work Time, 1960 – Present**

Country	1960-73	1974-84	1985-Present	Trend
Canada	56.9	55.4	54.2	Formalization
Denmark	41.4	-	43.3	Informalization
France <sup>a</sup>	52.0	55.5	57.5	Informalization
Netherlands	-	55.9	57.9	Informalization
Norway	57.1	55.4	-	Formalization
UK	52.1	49.7	53.9	Informalization
USA <sup>b</sup>	56.9	57.6	58.4	Informalization
Finland	-	51.8	54.5	Informalization
20 Countries	43.4	42.7	44.7	Informalization

Sources:  
 a. Chadeau and Fouquet (1981), Roy (1991), Dumontier and Pan Ke Shon (1999)  
 b. Robinson and Godbey (1997)  
 Other countries derived from Gershuny (2000: Tables 7.6, 7.12, 7.16)

about the trajectory of work which has closed off the future.

It is similar in the case commodification thesis. For adherents, capitalism is becoming ever more powerful, expansive and totalizing as it permeates deeper into every corner of life. Analysing whether most goods and services are produced by capitalist firms, however, it becomes quickly apparent that there is a much shallower penetration of capitalism than often assumed. Figure 1 reveals how goods and services are produced in western economies. It shows that less than half are produced and distributed through profit-motivated monetary exchanges. The majority are produced and delivered through non-commodified modes of work organization. Again, however, different trajectories can be identified in various areas and amongst different populations, suggesting that the direction of change is rather more heterogeneous and divergent than assumed by adherents to the commodification thesis (see Williams, 2007).

The third dominant vision that has closed off the future is the belief in an ever more open world economy (i.e., the globalization thesis) and how people, organizations and governments have no choice but to bow to the power of this immutable fact. Reviewing evidence of the degree of economic, financial, cultural and political globalization, however, Williams (2007) has identified that the imagined economies of globalization are very much a product of a particular way of looking at the world and a result of only looking in particular narrow confined spaces, and that once one interrogates more fully this phenomenon, a very different picture emerges of the shallow and uneven contours of globalization.

**Counter Visions of the Direction of Work**

In recent years, a host of counter visions have emerged that reject either descriptively or prescriptively the notions of formalization, commodification and globalization and instead invert the future (see Table 2).

These counter visions contest the dominant views by inverting either the temporal and/or normative sequencing of formalization, commodification or globalization. Either they suggest that there is a process of informalization, de-commodification or localization, or they suggest prescriptively that advancement lies not in formalization, commodification or globalisation but rather, in a process of informalization, de-commodification or localization.

Starting with those that contest formalization, one first of all has ‘third way’ thought. While ‘first way’ (neo-liberal) and ‘second way’ (socialist) thought was ultimately about whether private or public sector provision is the best way of achieving formalization and commodification, ‘third way’ thought incorporates civil society as a third prong. However, it is in the sphere of welfare provision and this realm alone, that third way exponents believe that not only private and public sector provision but also a third prong of ‘civil society’ needs to be harnessed (e.g., Giddens, 2000). In the realm of ‘economic’ policy, its vision remains entrenched in formalization, commodification and globalization as the path to progress. This starkly contrasts with other counter visions that contest on descriptive and/or normative grounds the narrative of formalization and envisage the future of work to lie in the development of informal work as an alternative and/or complement to the formal economy (e.g., Archibugi, 2000; Beck, 2000; Gorz, 1999; Rifkin, 1996).

Similarly, a host of visions contest commodification. On one hand, there are those accepting that there is/should be a process of formalization but reject commodification. Here, a future of work is

**Figure 1: Work Organisation in Western Societies: Maximum and Minimum Contributions of Each Sphere**

<b>Monetary Exchange</b>	Not-for-profit monetized exchange 4-10%	
	Profit-motivated exchange 39-57%	
<b>Non-monetized work</b>	Non-exchanged work 28-51%	Non-monetized exchange 4-7%

Source: Williams (2005a, Figure 5.1)

**Table 2: Dominant and Counter Visions of the Future of Work**

Dominant Visions	Counter Visions
Formalization	Informalization of welfare: third way visions of work: post-employment visions
Commodification	De-commodification of employment: non-capitalist visions of work: post-capitalist visions of work
Globalization	Localization of work and welfare: green visions

Source: Williams (2007, Table 1.2)

envisaged in which not-for-profit employment comes to the fore. On the other hand, there are those ‘post-capitalist’ visions that discuss on either descriptive and/or prescriptive grounds the growth of an array of non-commodified work practices. Pervading such discourses is often a view that there is a need to cease mapping an ever more commodified world because of the performative effects of such a narrative. Such a mapping is viewed as creating what is then seen and for these analysts, there is a need to recognize, value and create non-capitalist economic practices that are already here and emerging so as to shine a light on the demonstrable construction of alternative possibilities and futures (e.g., *Escobar, 1995; Gibson-Graham, 2006a,b; Williams, 2005a,b*).

Finally, there are visions of the future of work that contest the narrative of globalization by arguing for greater localization in order to achieve a future of work which is environmentally sustainable (e.g., *Goldsmith et al, 1995; Henderson, 1999; Robertson, 1991*). In these ‘deeper green’ perspectives, a radically different future for work is both described and/or prescribed grounded in localization and self-reliance.

What is valuable about these post-employment, post-capitalist and localist counter visions is that they open up possible futures for work beyond formalization, commodification and globalization. Perhaps less convincing, however, is that they often simply invert the normative judgements of the formalization, commodification and globalization theses. The result is that just as the dominant narratives over-romanticize formalization and so forth, these visionaries do the same with informalization, de-commodifi-

cation and localization. Ultimately, therefore, such commentaries simply continue with the same mode of thought as the dominant narratives by constructing a dichotomy which envisages or prescribes an either/or choice and then concocts this in a temporal manner as a one-dimensional linear transformation from some ‘old’ to ‘new’ form of work organization.

### Futures for Employment

It is not just the three dominant narratives and their counter-visions however, that conflate present-day differences across space, sectors and occupations into some temporal sequence where one side of the coin is viewed as being supplanted by the other side of the coin. There are also a host of visions of the future of employment organization (rather than work more generally) that similarly delineate some dualism and then depict a linear progression from one side of the binary to the other over time (see Table 3).

Firstly, there are those depicting the future of employment organization as a shift from an industrial society to a post-industrial, information or knowledge economy. Secondly, there are those depicting the future of work in terms of a shift in employment practices from Fordist to post-Fordist practices and third and finally, those portraying a shift in work organization from bureaucracy to post-bureaucracy, or what is sometimes referred to as from direct to indirect control,

compliance to commitment, hard to soft human resource management, or industrial relations to human resource management.

All these visions, however, are less clear cut than often intimated and less all-embracing. Indeed, rather than a temporal streamlined evolution from one to the other, these dichotomies tend to conflate present-day differences across space, sectors and occupations into a temporal sequence, in which one side of the coin (e.g., industrialism, Fordism, bureaucracy, capitalist employment) is supplanted by the other side of the coin (e.g., post-industrial, post-Fordism, post-bureaucracy, non-capitalist employment). For all these visions, therefore, the lived practice is that many organizations include elements of both sides of these dichotomies and that the boundaries between the two are much fuzzier than often intimated. For recent commentators, this is sometimes taken as evidence that ‘hybrid’ forms are emerging. What is much more

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the range of  
alternative  
possibilities they  
have open to  
them is rather  
very limited**

**Table 3: Dichotomous Visions of Futures for Employment**

Nature of change	Old	New
Sector-based	Industrial society	Post-industrial Knowledge economy Information economy
Employment Practices	Fordism	Post-Fordism
Organizational	Bureaucracy Compliance	Post-bureaucracy Commitment
	Direct control Hard human resource management	Indirect control Soft human resource management

Source: Williams (2007, Table 1.1)

likely, however, is that organizations have always displayed elements of both sides of the dichotomy and that such dualistic thought was never capable of delineating the lived practices.

**Conclusions**

When most visions of the future of work pinpoint a dichotomy and then order the two sides into a temporal (and normative) sequence, and these narratives achieve the status of facts, some critical re-thinking about the future of work is necessary. Rather than worship tales about a universal linear trajectory towards some ‘-ation’, ‘-ism’ or ‘post-something-or-other’, as is the case in so many texts that wish to portray the future in instantly understandable terms, this paper has intimated that these simple narratives need to be transcended.

Until now, those highlighting either the limited degree to which such visions of the future of work actually reflect lived practice, or the shortcomings of using only one dichotomy, have tended to argue that there is far greater continuity with the past than normally intimated in these visions (e.g., Nolan and Woods, 2003; Noon and Blyton 2002; Ransome, 1999; Thompson and McHugh, 2002; Warhust and Thompson 1998; White et al, 2004). As Thompson and McHugh (2002: 189) put it, ‘Continuity in organizational structure, work and employment might not be as exciting a message, but it is often a more accurate one’.

At first glance, this paper might appear to reinforce such a stance. For example, the arguments that informal and non-commodified work persist, and that formalization and commodification is far from hegemonic, as well as that post-Fordist and post-bureaucratic practices are far from pervasive, seem to support a recognition of the continuity between the present-day and the past. However, although this paper suggests that there is

relatively more continuity with the past than many futurologists explicate, it does not deny the possibility for change. Indeed, quite the opposite is the case. It recognises, similar to many others, that there is both continuity and change is occurring (Blyton and Turnbull, 1994; Jacques, 1998; Legge, 1995; Ransome, 2005). The changes taking place, however, are not configured in some one-dimensional linear manner as towards some singular -ism, -ation or post-something-or-other. Instead, multiple changes are viewed as taking place which vary across space, sectors, occupations and populations.

In consequence, rather than reproduce what Thompson and McHugh (2002: 169) call ‘The basic pattern ... of stereotypical polarization, limited evidence and neglect of diversity, [which] tends to be produced in each new generation of macro arguments’, a more kaleidoscopic view (c.f., Tsoukas and Cummings, 1997) is adopted in which there are no universal linear logics but instead, many fragments moving in different directions in various parts of the picture. None of the individual visions wholly capture and reflect these heterogeneous directions in which work organization is moving in the contemporary world. For the future of work to be more fully understood, it is not only the continuity with the past but also the diverse and inconsistent trajectories in the present that need to be recognized. It is only in so doing that the many possibilities for the future become apparent along with the degree to which the future of work is open. To foreground just one fragment and obfuscate others from view fails to grasp the diverse, often contradictory, shifts in working practices in the contemporary business world. For a fuller understanding of the future of work, therefore, it is no use focusing upon one dualism or fragment.

Yet even if this paper concludes that the future of work is not so closed as usually intimated, and therefore the future more in our hands than frequently assumed, it would be a mistake to leave readers assuming that the future is what we wish to make it. Not only are some visions, such as formalization, commodification and globalization, supported by very powerful vested interests, but for most individuals today, the future is anything but in their hands. For most people, the range of alternative possibilities they have open to them is very limited. Although divergent trajectories and a mass of possibilities for the direction of change thus exist on a global level, this is not the case for most individuals and populations in their everyday lives. Some people are confined to Fordist employment practices or formal employment. Others are largely confined to informal economic practices. The task ahead, there-

fore, is surely to work towards ensuring that people have greater choice about the type of work in which they want to engage. If this paper in displaying that the future is not cast in stone, and that it is wholly possible to imagine all alternative futures, helps to stimulate discussion about how to open up the future more for those who currently have little choice, then it will have fulfilled its objective. [IER](#)

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