

# Leadership

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# Building a world where everybody works less for more money






## During a recent heated debate about annual leave with the executives of one of France's largest financial services businesses in Paris, the rationale for work today subtly took over proceedings

**M**acron's old France: The young and energetic French President, Emmanuel Macron, had just taken a robust and tenacious stance in wanting to push productivity in French business by making some tough and rather unpopular calls on what appeared to be outdated labour law. He had recently stated that, "We are implementing an in-depth reform on the labour market, not to reduce rights for workers but to provide more visibility and more efficiency to investors and employers because it's the key for job creation".

This move had emboldened the senior executives of the business to take a strong and perhaps divisive stance against what they saw as excessive annual leave. Some long serving employees were now enjoying up to 63 days annual leave, and the proposal was to reduce them to a still (for many) jaw dropping 54 days. Many of us in the room looked at this through pejorative Anglo-Saxon eyes, and just could not get our heads around 54 days leave, let alone 63 days!

A couple of Americans in the room had to survive on just 10 days off a year before joining the company, and the Brits present had



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enjoyed the relative luxury of 25 days – what is it with the French? Or as ever, are they on to something here?

### The subterfuge of Sicily

This reminded me of a trip I made to Sicily a few years ago with Franco, a proud Sicilian friend of mine. He insisted that we went to visit a high-quality shoe shop owned by one of his relatives while travelling in Sicily. It was in the lovely and picturesque town of Agrigento, which had a strong reputation for its bespoke and beautiful footwear of the highest quality.

It was a Wednesday morning and as we pulled up it was obvious the shop was closed. Franco was a little frustrated, but he completely understood and turned smiling wryly at me and said, “I completely forgot, as soon as he makes the money he needs for the week, he and his employees shut down the shop and go home”. I couldn’t understand this, and suggested “that’s madness, what about the missed sales opportunities for not opening for the rest of the week?”

Franco responded quietly, “this is Sicily, he will spend the rest of the week doing all the enjoyable things his quality craftsmanship has earned him the opportunity to do. He will be sailing his boat, dining with friends and enjoying the beach”.

This made no sense through my middle-aged Anglo-Saxon eyes. But maybe, just maybe this was an insight into a new future. It reminded me of the perennial question that many of the French and Italians have always derided us Brits with, “Do you work to live, or do you live to work?” Have we become so fixated with working? Has it become far more than a means to an end? Does it really define us more than anything else and all we stand for?

### Mechanised metamorphosis

As the populations of both Europe and the USA grow older, the march of the robots accelerates, artificial intelligence and other disruptive technologies infiltrate, rushing to fill the jobs for the young and change the world of work more than anything else we have seen in human history.

Maybe there’s something to be said about capitalising on the twin forces of automating the ‘low skilled’ work and driving better pay and conditions for employees, while making sure that it leads to more leisure time for all. Maybe we can learn something from our French and Sicilian friends.

With the huge changes taking place in the world of work, the questions of why and how we work become ever more pressing and perhaps deserve a complete reappraisal leading to very new and different answers.

Here in the UK many jobs are being automated and completely disappearing. Some would say every generation since the industrial revolution has had to cope with fundamental change, and this generation is no different. From the steam engine, to electricity to the motorcar, to aeroplanes – we have seen it all before and humankind has always found a way of tangibly and demonstrably managing and benefitting from the seismic changes. But this might just be a very different time.

New technologies are coming fiercer and faster and what may be different is that they are not appearing in a helpful linear and polite queue, they are now impatiently and rudely stacking up on each other. The automotive industry is a typical example of things moving so quickly that even the market leaders are clueless on what to invest in. Even wily investors are spraying their cash in all different directions.

They went from petrol to diesel, and then emissions took them away from diesel and on to hybrids on the way to electric, then up came the driverless car just before the autonomous vehicle. Who should invest in what? Who are the major players? Ford, Volvo, Google? Uber? Apple? Tesla?

### Will the future be utopian or dystopian?

There are still many of us who have grandparents who actually worked in the coal mines or the cotton mills or at the docks or in the steel plants. Nearly all of these jobs have completely disappeared within a couple of generations. Far too many of those who worked in those industries were left with completely redundant and sometimes useless skills and the bleakest of futures.

And if we look at many of our once thriving coastal resorts here in the UK, they have rapidly become listless and lifeless places. Not that long ago, they were the epitome of fun and leisure, places for happy families and fond memories. With the rise of the low-cost airlines it soon became cheaper to pack the family off to Spain or Italy for less than it would cost to take them to Blackpool or Great Yarmouth.

No one seemed to notice, and worse still, no one seemed to care.

It should not have been a surprise that many of these now marginalised folks whose jobs, livelihoods and self-esteem had disappeared, felt abandoned and expressed their anger by voting for Brexit. It was similar awful experiences and seeming isolation that brought so many who were disillusioned in the USA to cast their vote for Trump.

Many of us who have become labelled the ‘metropolitan elite’ still believe that both the vote for Brexit and those who voted for Trump were completely irrational, this is complete nonsense. These voters were in the main completely rational.

On Donald Trump’s last day of electioneering for the American Presidency he went to Flint, Michigan. It was a brilliantly perceptive and insightful decision.

No American city better illustrates the rapid economic decline of America’s previously rock solid Democratic voting rust belt. Flint is nicknamed “Vehicle City”, and was the home to one of the biggest automotive industry hubs in the USA. Much like in the UK, as manufacturing jobs vanished, the prosperity that Flint had so recently enjoyed collapsed. In 2014, things in the city got so bad that desperate to cut costs, Flint’s cash-strapped municipal government switched its water supplier. This was a disastrous decision, as many desperate cost cutting measures tend to be. Unfortunately, the new water supply was contaminated with high levels of lead that caused health problems ranging from heart disease to brain damage.

Trump, as ever, caught the prevailing mood and his foghorn campaign messages captured this mood. He evocatively reminded them that not that long ago, Flint was prosperous, and at that time Mexico was terrible, with high unemployment, high in crime and you couldn’t drink the water there.

On this particular day in Flint, unemployment was now high, crime was rising, and you couldn’t now drink the water there. But in Mexico, where much of the automotive industry had moved to, unemployment was now low and you could drink the water.

This emotionally charged message touched many who felt angry that the metropolitan elite in Washington DC couldn’t care less about them.

While their feelings were wildly stoked up, they were completely rational.

The ongoing decimation of jobs in the interests of operational efficiency and consequently

profits will always leave many feeling marginalised and uncared for, while a few select (and elite) groups of investors and senior executives are the beneficiaries. We now need different and more inclusive measurements of success, which by design help engage with the society we live in and serve. As long as the results of automation appear to serve the few at the cost of many, there will be discord and those who feel left behind.

We now live in a world where digital technology is producing 'big data' that is already borderless, and will spread beyond the reach of national governments. The focus might move towards differentiating between where people actually live and work, rather than national strategies where one size fits no one.

Therefore, our solutions to this new world of perhaps radically reduced employment should not be driven by the fear of robots and artificial intelligence, but maybe it should be more about embracing them and consequently changing the way we are able to (and want to) live our lives.

Working a lot less hours but maintaining, if not increasing, our earnings should become the radical and realistic goal.

### Dynamite demographics

In the near future there will be a huge global demographic shift; Europe's population will shrink even further while its inhabitants get much older. The USA will also shrink and get older, Asia will have parts that will be older and parts that will be younger but will still grow. The real explosive change will happen in Africa, where it will become very young with an explosion in its population.

Many will see this as catastrophic, but if we think about this differently and follow the way global trade flows will change, with younger populations buying much more than older populations, we could take advantage of this again by the way we choose to live out our working lives and elderly years. Working far less and enjoying ourselves a lot more. This means thinking beyond natural borders and taking far more inclusive, dare we say, global views.

Maybe our French and Sicilian friends have provided a glimpse of the way forward that we could all strive to match?

It will require completely different thinking and the focus may become far more on cities and their surrounding populations rather than nations.



We might even build a world where everybody works less for more money with far more leisure time, while letting the robots and artificial intelligence pick up the slack.

Why not?

### The young ones

In order to even begin to realise the fruits of this conversation, let alone bring about this particular utopian dream, we must bring in younger voices to provoke and perhaps lead this essential discussion.

Far too many of those of my vintage struggle to come to terms with the rationality of the highly charged debate that I witnessed in Paris, and these discussions need to be entered into without bias.

Younger more inclusive voices may well avoid the marginalisation that my metropolitan elite colleagues and I played an inadvertent hand in making happen.

We need a new fresh leadership:

- Hire and appoint people different and younger than you
- Invite under 25-year olds to your management meetings
- Never stop asking those not yet in management "What do you think?"
- Forget experience and rank – look for those who can influence and persuade
- Enable people to 'challenge up' and learn to 'support down'

- Take more risks with the young and fresh
- Look to skip a generation with some of your promotions
- Listen to those who don't naturally have a voice
- Look for wisdom in the young
- Not everything old is good and not everything new is bad

Back to one of those so necessary younger voices, Emmanuel Macron, "It's about our ability precisely to integrate a people and offer jobs, and that, for me, is one of the key rationales of the reforms I'm pushing, and I'm a strong believer in that when you lift barriers, when you deregulate a lot of stuff, basically you improve the equality of opportunities".

It is highly unlikely that our current generation of political and business leaders, who are at least middle aged and out of touch with those who are not like them, and driven either by outdated ideology or only the profit and loss account, will be the ones who will lead us out of these troubled times.

One of the most outspoken and striking change agents of this young and fearless new leadership is Elon Musk, he observes "some people don't like change, but you need to embrace change if the alternative is disaster". ▲

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