Putting workers at the center of the future of work

On October 6-9, 2020, students, practitioners, and leaders from business, civil society and academia came together virtually for the fourth annual Berkeley Haas-Microsoft Conference on Business, Technology, and Human Rights.

Focused on the Future of Workers, the conference built on the themes introduced two years ago in the 2018 conference on the Future of Work. Reframing the issue to focus specifically on workers, attendees examined the impact of technology on the lives and rights of workers around the world. Participants explored potential solutions for using technology in ways that will empower workers and discussed how different sectors can work to create a more inclusive economy for all workers in the age of AI and automation.

The goal of the conference was to build a more nuanced understanding of the risks and opportunities that technological innovation poses for workers. In the context of COVID-19 and the increasingly exposed gaps in social justice and equality, participants discussed practical ideas and potential solutions to build a more inclusive economy for all workers.

Workers must be part of the solution

Technological change in the workplace is often evaluated by the degree of efficiency improvements it leads to and not so much by the impact it creates on workers who carry out this transition. The insights created by technology solutions are used mainly by employers and workers rarely have access to the data or inferences made about themselves. The uneven control of data and technology solutions furthers the skewed power dynamic between the employer and the worker. During the conference, participants highlighted the missed opportunity for businesses—both workers and employers can benefit immensely from the participation of workers in the solution.

To ensure that technology empowers both parties, workers need to be given a say in how technology is designed, implemented, and governed in the workplace. Workers should have input on which data is being collected from them and how algorithms are being used to make inferences about their work. One of the speakers noted that "there is a myth that workers are anti-tech,"

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Participants explored practical ways to include workers in the design, implementation, and governance of technology. One of the speakers talked about their own mother's experience as a worker at a hypermarket: "One day they decided to wipe down the cash registers, only to bring them back a few months later. Had they asked the workers in the frontline, they would never have this problem in the first place," underlining the importance of including workers in the decision-making process from the start.

On the other hand, some companies are doing a much better job in giving workers a seat at the table. For example, one of the speakers explained how a major healthcare provider built a successful labor management partnership where employers and unionized workers come together to make decisions regarding technological change. Seeing the employer's commitment to keep jobs and benefits, workers fully embraced the transition and the company ran a successful roll-out of Electronic Health Records. The speaker noted, "The company was able to gain workers' knowledge during the design and implementation of the new tool. When workers are involved directly, technological change is not so scary."

As one of the speakers stated, "Tech is not a predetermined phenomenon that happens *to* us, it is something we can and must shape." We need to think actively about our vision for the Future of Work. Another speaker suggested we need to frame the language not as *technological change*, but as *technological progression*, if we want technology to empower workers, instead of expecting them to catch up with it.

Social inequities must be addressed

We must not forget that all workers experience technological change differently due to social and geographical inequities. With COVID-19, the inequities between workers have been exposed even more starkly. Participants discussed how the economic recovery from COVID-19 is uneven; for example, in the global garment supply chain, the pandemic has disproportionately affected women workers. Similarly, the effects of technological change are also distributed unevenly. According to a recent research done by one of the speakers, black and Hispanic workers in the US are at highest risk of losing jobs due to automation.

One of the most important solutions to address the uneven impact of technological change has been focusing on the skills gap. Some panelists highlighted that upskilling is not enough by itself; we must also address the opportunity gap and ensure that jobs are equally available to all workers. Especially in the context of COVID-19, broadband access is a critical requirement to have access to work. Panelists noted the importance of private and public sector collaboration to bridge the digital divide.

An increasingly popular solution for economic inclusion has been *impact sourcing*, where companies prioritize suppliers from underdeveloped areas or populations. Bringing high-quality knowledge-based work to these areas act as a springboard for economic development. While such solutions use the

power of the supply chain to make positive shifts, we are also witnessing new work structures, such as crowdsourcing, creating an invisible workforce in their value chains. As an example, one of the speakers described how data enrichment services critical for the AI supply chain—while valuable for companies—"shifts the risk traditionally borne by companies, such as the cost of search, to individual workers."

Supply chain technology solutions, such as worker voice platforms, provide increased visibility into working conditions, especially those of marginalized workers who are often invisible within value chains. While these tools help promote workers' rights, we must also be aware of several pitfalls. Private sector companies need to introduce concrete frameworks to understand the potential negative impacts and externalities of technology solutions. One of the speakers also highlighted the shortcomings of technology tools: "Technology can only go so far. We shouldn't forget that the main question is around business models and larger structural issues."

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Multi-sector collaboration is key for success

One of the overarching themes of the conference was the need for increased collaboration between different sectors. Participants highlighted the need for multi-stakeholder models that include legislators, labor representatives, and business representatives. Another essential group is educational institutions. Speakers shared examples of successful partnerships between universities and private sector companies where companies communicate directly with universities on which skills will be most important for them and do direct hiring of students who complete necessary training. Such partnerships are incredibly effective, especially in increasing opportunities for underrepresented minorities.

Many speakers noted the importance of public-private partnerships in addressing inequities. For example, to bridge the digital divide, private sector efforts will not be sufficient; the political will is also crucial. Governments across the world need to accelerate infrastructure investments to ensure access to broadband and make targeted investments for social equity.

COVID-19 has uncovered the interdependencies between different social issues; it is clearer than ever that social safety nets must be strengthened to achieve an inclusive economic recovery. For example, participants discussed how stronger policies around childcare or elder care are especially important for women to be able to have access to decent work. Health insurance is critical for independent contractors or part-time workers who make the gig economy work. The distinction between minimum wage and living wage must be acknowledged by both policy makers and businesses. Participants highlighted that following the shock that COVID-19 created in our systems, this might be the perfect time to revisit such discussions.

Many of the ideas and solutions suggested during the conference cannot happen in a vacuum and true collaboration must happen across sectors to maximize their potential and success. Collaboration is key for a successful post-COVID economy recovery and a more inclusive future for workers.