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## The impact of artificial intelligence on our work identity

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What do you do?

It's always the first question we ask when we meet someone for the first time. It's a safe place to start. An icebreaker that is innocuous enough and opens the door to find some common ground. It's an invitation to start creating rapport with the other person. It's a habit we have all accepted and don't even think about it. But even with the best of intentions, the question forces the person we are meeting to label themselves with the job title they wear from 9 to 5 – and maybe that's an issue, when that label taints our first impression.

What tends to happen after we have swapped answers to the question is that we then tend to use the job title to judge the person in front of us and determine how much social status they have – in order to act accordingly. This natural human tendency is one that is going to cause us a lot of trouble in the decades to come.

The work we do, day after day, is a crucial component of our identity as humans and it has been since the beginning of time. Ever since humans realised the immense gains that could be unlocked through (1) mass co-operation and (2) the delegation of different tasks to different people who could then specialise in that area, the unique job each individual does has, in most part, determined that person's wealth, status, prospects and overall happiness. The way economies grew was to tie this sort of intrinsic human value to the socially-determined value we were providing in the society through our labour. That's how things were/are measured. The type of labour an individual is able to provide dictates corporate hierarchies, feeds power imbalances, controls financial destinies and nurtures cultural norms. Most importantly, though, it deeply affects how we think of ourselves. The labels on our business cards are self-imposed pressure points that can make it more difficult to be truly authentic and live in our own skin.

This type of identity-hacking, as I will call it, is troubling. It's a natural by-product of the capitalist economic system that has driven economic growth since the industrial age – but it sets us up for failure as we begin to transcend the type of work we have become accustomed to throughout the agricultural revolution.

The rise of advanced artificial intelligence (AI) is real and it lurks on the horizon, threatening with wide-spread digitisation and automation that looks likely to remove whole classes and industries of jobs right in front of our eyes – rendering significant portions of our labour force obsolete, unless they can transition and upskill quick enough to keep up. If you're on the extreme end of techno-optimism, you believe that artificially intelligent machines will be able to do almost all human jobs at a much higher level of efficiency and accuracy than a human, at a fraction of the cost. To what extent this is possible is still undetermined and beyond the scope of this essay, but what cannot be ignored is the significant cultural shift we will have to make.

In the short term, it will be possible to transition people into new roles and responsibilities – leveraging tasks that require empathy, emotional intelligence, creativity and other characteristics we haven't been able to program yet. But over a long enough time, scale, it would be naïve to think that with a fully AI-augmented work force, every human will have the same relationship to work as they do today. It is plausible (and some would say we are morally obligated) to imagine a world where resources are abundant, everyone's basic needs are taken care of and there isn't the pressure on every individual to work in the same way as we have today.

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What happens then?

If my value to society can't be measured by the impact of my labour, then how do I measure myself? How do I prove that I add value? How do I show that I matter?

The philosophical and psychological paradigm shift will be incredibly difficult to make. When co-ordinating in the types of large, complex groups we see in major cities, it makes it much easier to get along when we have a standard measurement we all can agree on. It creates order and purpose in a scalable way, so a society can grow and sustain itself. When that anchor is removed, and we are confronted with all the free time and free space we could have ever dreamed of, will we be able to handle it? When our value can't be easily measured, how does society react?

It is tempting, of course, to immediately respond positively to the questions above, imagining a life full of leisure; to be on holiday forever, letting the machines keep the world running for us. However, that intuition doesn't work in practice. Leisure time is valuable because it is limited (in time and in scope) and we have worked very hard to earn it – so we tend to savour it. A never-ending holiday of leisure would invite the kind of boredom that drives us mad.

As humans, we need to have a purpose. And we are going to need to find this outside of what we know today as a traditional career.

The kind of fulfilment I am alluding to requires a level of self-awareness (only arrived at through deep introspection) that is difficult to uncover when we are so heavily tied to the labels we are given by the rest of society – the ones we adorn our business cards with. When we remove the label of our job title, many of us will be faced with the startling realisation that we may not know ourselves at all – we don't know what we enjoy doing, we don't know what excites us, we don't know how to categorise ourselves – and that is scary.

However, it is actually a great opportunity to unlock the widespread type of human happiness every philosopher from Socrates to Peter Singer has yearned for.

The moment we are free of the financial pressures that require most of the world's population to do work they actually don't enjoy, it frees up time and resources for them to chase their dreams. It gives them a chance to find something more fulfilling to do with their time – something they choose to do. Whether that is doing more high-level creative work, spending more time with friends and family, chasing pursuits that were previously economically unfeasible, travelling the world – it doesn't matter. The routine, mundane, laborious tasks that consume our workforce today will be performed by AI, and the humans are free to explore, dream and create the future – if we are brave enough.

It's scary, I'll admit. Having a job title that distinctly summarises what I do and encapsulates the social status I have earned is much easier in conversation. But it hides our true humanity. It hides our unique selves behind generic labels. It forces people into boxes they don't want to be in. It provides ammunition for prejudicial judgment about a human's worth, ignoring their character, virtues, empathy, kindness, love – instead focusing on what type of labour they use to feed their families.

When you examine it, the way we label each other is holding us back. I am not my job title. I am a unique human being – complex, flawed and a walking contradiction.

AI can liberate us from the simplistic labels, if we are willing to let them go. We can be more authentic and look forward to each new day as a blank canvas.