

Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode: 1

Title: Technologies in the workplace

Speakers: Professor Chris Forde and Professor Mark Stuart

Chris: Welcome to Leeds University Business School's Research and Innovation Podcast. I'm Chris Forde, I'm professor of employment studies in the Centre for Employment Relations, Innovation and Change.

Mark: Hi, Professor Mark Stuart, also from the Centre for Employment Relations, Innovation and Change, and also co-director of a new ESRC research centre, Digital Futures at Work.

Chris: Today, in this podcast, we're going to be looking at technologies and technologies in the workplace in particular. So, to begin with, what do we actually mean by... when we talk about technologies, and the use of technologies at work, what sort of things are we talking about, Mark?

Mark: Well, it could mean a whole range of things. There's a lot of contemporary interest in new technologies at work, but of course we've been familiar with technological change for some considerable time. But in the current period, most interest has been around things like robots, general automation of workplaces, digitalisation at work in terms of the software that we use on computers, the increasing use of platforms. We see it in many sectors.

So, if we go into retail we're thinking about self check-in scanners, obviously in factories we're thinking about automation and robots on assembly lines, this type of stuff. But I think that the big issue for today is the extent to which technologies, and particular digital technologies are permeating more widely, everything we do in terms of the way in which we work and also the way in which we live.

Chris: And you do see this, these ideas used a lot in terms of when people talk about profound change, you hear a lot of speculation about, "The robots are taking over our jobs, we're going to be displaced from our jobs in the workplace," according to some. And then you've got others who are saying, "Well, actually these trends, these developments that you're talking about could have some very positive effects," the sort of changes that you've referred to already might give people more autonomy, more discretion over how they do their work. Trying to cut some through some of this... the speculation that's been in the media

and the popular press around this, what do we actually know about the likely impact of some of these technologies at work? Is it going to be the fact that people are going to have their jobs replaced? Are there positive opportunities? What's your view on this?

Mark:

I think that's the profound question of the day. And there has been a lot of research on this. I don't think it's conclusive. Some academics like to differentiate between what they see as replacing technologies, so technologies that fundamentally take jobs away, and enabling technologies, technologies that may create new opportunities. And sometimes we might see at, sort of, historical period in terms of which technologies may move from one to the other, so you might initially see technologies in a sector taking a, sort of, replacing approach and then over time it might actually become enabling. So, there is a, sort of, a bit of time frame and an unknown aspect to this.

But I think more generally it's quite useful to differentiate between three potential scenarios. The first is the extent to which technology will replace jobs. So, within a particular sector you might see the automation of processes that actually make many people redundant, or actually could even completely transform a sector and make it almost moribund, where something else replaces it. The other alternative could be the creation of new types of jobs, but also new types of industries and sectors, and I think one area of particular interest amongst researchers and maybe I'll ask you to talk a little bit about this in a minute, Chris, could be platforms. And then I think the third and the most interesting area, and actually the area that we probably know the least about, is general change in the way in which we work. So, the actual nature of work.

So, it's not just about technology taking jobs away, or creating new jobs, it's about actually, there will still be work in the future because some of these scenarios predict, essentially, the end of work. But if we accept that work will continue, and I think all the evidence suggests that it does, how will that work actually change? And what does that actually mean? And I think that's such a big question, and that's what we're really grappling with.

But Chris, I know that you've been doing some work on platforms and the, sort of, platform economy, however that's defined. Could you explain a little bit about that? What we mean by the platform economy and, maybe, what sort of things you were looking at?

Chris: I think that's a really interesting example and it does fit, I think, with the second category that you're talking about there. Some platforms have been around for quite some time, in other words we're talking here about the use of technologies to mediate the relationship between workers, on the one hand, and employers. So, you have platforms, sometimes apps or technologies which allow workers to find work or to actually do work.

Now, there's a whole variety of these, we can think about things like taxi ridesharing, for example and taxi driving where organisations like Uber are using technologies to, basically, organise their whole work. Now, taxi driving has been an occupation that's been around for many decades, but many would argue that it's been transformed by the development of these sort of apps. Now, the effects of this for workers and the implications for workers, there's a lot of debate about this. Some say it's... it can have a positive impact, giving more people... people more choice over how and when they work. Others say, well, actually these technologies can have quite negative effects. If you think about the very nature of the relationship between the employer and the worker with the use of some of these apps, there's no longer an employment relationship there.

Mark: That's really fascinating. I think this is a really... certainly captured the imagination of many researchers, although from what I understand it may not constitute that much in employment terms, in terms of total employment within economies. But is it also the case that there are different types of platforms? So, people would do different types of work, or is it a, sort of, general purpose technology, as you understand it?

Chris: No, you're right, there are very different kinds of platforms, and there are some which, I think... a categorisation we use in the report is some which operate very much on a local basis, so the platform mediates work but the work is essentially undertaken in a particular locality, so you can think about ridesharing taxi services, for example. You have a platform there, but someone has still got to pick up a customer and driver them to a certain place within a particular location.

Then you've got those sorts of platforms where you're really operating in a global market and you're competing for work and finding work with workers from around the world. So, if you think about platforms like Amazon Mechanical Turk, for example, where clients can put jobs, tasks, on the platform and people can bid to undertake that piece of work from around the world. Now, there's some quite big effects, if you look at those platforms on a

global basis what we've seen is that wages are often very low on those platforms for particular jobs because you're working in a global marketplace often you find that wages are compressed and pushed down to lower levels than you might see in, say, the UK as an average wage. So, you've got local versus global type of platforms, you've also got platforms which operate very much on a sectoral or a trade basis, so you have platforms which are helping people source work for particular crafts and trades, for example.

So, it is a very varied sector with a lot of different activities. The other thing I should say as well is you've got quite traditional intermediaries like employment agencies who are moving into this area as well and providing platforms alongside their traditional, sort of, intermediary work as a way of bringing employers and workers together. So, there's a lot of change and flux in this sector.

Mark:

Does this... I think one of the things that we've talked about quite a bit is what this means from, maybe, a policy perspective? Because if we're talking about platforms or technologies disrupting work, and you just mentioned particularly in the case of platforms, these types of workers may have less protections than others. In some cases, it might be colleagues losing their jobs. What are the implications of technology from a, sort of, policy perspective? What are governments looking at in terms of trying to address these challenges for the future? Because my reading of the situation, Chris, and I was involved with that platform work with you which we did for the European Parliament, and we're doing another project for the European Parliament at the moment looking at the future of work, is: what are policymakers in governments looking at in terms of what they think will make a difference going forward? I mean, one area is skills, but there may be others, I guess, I mean, what's your, sort of, thinking in this area?

Chris:

That's a really good question. There's no doubt that this is causing headaches and concerns for policymakers, and there are no easy answers here, I think. It's made policymakers think, I think, about the nature of employment and the type of work that people are doing in the 21st century. I think your point that you made earlier, Mark, is really important, that it's important not to overstate the number of people who are working through platforms, estimates vary from about one to five percent of the workforce, although quite a lot of... quite a lot more workers have engaged with these platforms at one time or another. But certainly, it's a relatively small percentage of the workforce at the

moment, but, having said that, the concerns of policymakers are that these workers are simply not getting the protections that other workers have. But there have been challenges of trying to come up with appropriate regulation and to protect them more effectively.

I think one of the key concerns and issues is that it's simply not straightforward who the employer is in these kinds of relationships. In some countries, policymakers have agreed an attempt to legislate on the basis that people working through platforms are employed by the platforms that they're engaged with. Others say that it's the client firm that these workers are working for who are the employer and in other countries, the UK, there have been different judgements made at different points in time. So, I think there has got to be recognition that these forms of worker are somehow different.

But, at the same time, if you look at the types of activity that people are doing, you compare them to directly employed workers, often these people are undertaking very similar tasks and performing their work in quite a similar way, they're using similar technologies in the workplace to other workers. So, I think policymakers have got to try and recognise that there is a lot of similarity, as much as difference, between these workers and people who are employed in more traditional employment relations.

Mark:

I think one of the questions is that policymakers are struggling with the likely impact of this. So, with platforms it's perhaps quite clear in some scenarios because there are all these debates around the employment contract and the breach of the standard employment contract and whether workers are self-employed, are bogus self-employed and things like that.

But if you think more broadly around the potential implications of the way in which people work and whether people are losing their jobs or not, then it raises much more profound questions. And I think it also raises issues around the anticipation of change, and this is one of the difficult things for policymakers, it's much easier to look at something that's happened and then address it, but when you're looking to the future and trying to anticipate what may happen, it's much more difficult and we've done research on this previously, Chris, in terms of restructuring, we looked at anticipating and managing change.

And ultimately, we are talking about restructuring here, but the debates on this from a policy perspective cover so many different issues. There are debates around skills and, you know,

once again the idea of lifelong learning is back on the table. The way in which we teach kids at schools through digital technologies and developing digital, sort of, understanding is really important. There are debates around universal basic income, so that people have a basic platform of income in case they lose their jobs in the future. There are all debates around flexicurity and employability. There are even debates around the, sort of, the infrastructure within economies as well, in terms of digital access and also issues around housing, if people can't get access to digital technologies in rural areas and stuff like this.

So, it's very interesting. If you read academic texts, then you find all these profound options for policymakers. Policymakers often tend to go down to what they can and can't do, and a lot of this, perhaps, is why there are these debates around skills and equipping people with skills.

But I think one of the big issues, and maybe we should start to finish here, would be about who makes these decisions. Because when we talk about technology, sometimes the debate becomes a little bit deterministic, so technology causes certain outcomes, when actually it's not so much about the technology, it's about how the technology is used, how it's implemented, who makes decisions around this. And I think that's why some of the best policy discussions talk about the need for a new social contract in economies, that it shouldn't just be, perhaps employers who are making these decisions, and actually sometimes employers struggle with these technologies and how to use them, but what about the perspectives of workers and what are the roles for the state? So, I think, moving forward and understanding that these challenges are profound and they need to be addressed through bringing together all the relevant stakeholders, the state, employers and workers, to help deliver, I guess, a better future in terms of technologies is what we should be really interested in. But fundamentally profound questions for us as researchers.

Chris:

Thank you. Thanks a lot, Mark for your time today and we hope that you've enjoyed this podcast.