

„Switch-Happens“

Switch-Column by Monica Deters

How millions of people experience the switch into a new era.



Which side will you escape to?

A storm is sweeping through the world of work. And with it, a new social divide is emerging: today, it is still rich or poor. Tomorrow, perhaps work or freedom.



This morning, it was really windy out in the fields. Wonderful! I love the wind. Whenever it picks up, I especially enjoy going outside. And when it turns into a real storm, I sometimes even head out again just for the fun of it. My dogs love it too. Their ears and fur go flying, and we stand there like captains on a ship, facing into the wind. Glorious. I am, and always will be, a child of the coast.

Wind does not frighten me. Quite the opposite. I love that force that sweeps through everything and, for a moment, shakes the world out of its familiar order. And as we walked across the fields this morning, I thought: **That is exactly what is happening to us right now.** A storm is sweeping across our country. Only this storm is not made of wind. It is made of extreme change.

Freedom Used to Mean Having a Job

For generations, things were fairly straightforward: if you wanted to be free, you had to earn your own money. Work meant income. Income meant independence. And if you worked hard, you could build something for yourself. A home. A family. A certain level of prosperity. Perhaps even move up in society. But work was more than that. It gave us an identity. "What do you do?" is still one of the first questions we ask when we meet someone new. I'm a tradesman. A doctor. A sales assistant. An entrepreneur. An employee. We say **what we do** and somehow believe that this also explains a little of **who we are**.

But now the wind is changing, because these centuries-old certainties are beginning to shake.

Artificial intelligence is already taking over tasks that previously required human beings. Automation and robotics continue to advance. Companies are changing their structures, professions are evolving, some jobs will disappear and new ones will emerge. No one can seriously predict how much work will be left for us in five or ten years. But perhaps that is not even the biggest question. Perhaps the real question is: **What happens if work is no longer a prerequisite for freedom?**

We talk surprisingly little about this. We tend to see a future with less human labour almost exclusively as a threat. Yet in the long term, it could also mean something else: a new kind of freedom that many people already dream of today.

Rich or Poor

Today, our society is divided largely by economic opportunity. Rich and poor. But what happens if, one day, machines are able to produce a significant share of what human beings currently have to work for? Then an entirely new dividing line could emerge. Between people who still have to work to finance their lives – and people who are free to decide how they spend their time.

Work or Freedom

That would be an enormous social switch. And, at least initially, probably not a fair one. Because technological progress does not automatically distribute its benefits fairly. That is something we will have to debate politically and as a society. But there is another question we will have to confront: **Who am I if I am no longer needed?**

Which Side Will You Escape To?

Perhaps freedom does not mean that one day we will stop working altogether. Perhaps it means no longer having to work in the way we have always had to. Because there is an enormous difference between **having to work** and **wanting to work**. But anyone who has to support a family of four and

pay their bills every month often cannot even begin to ask the question of freedom until the question of money has been answered.

Perhaps many people will still have to work in the future, even though machines will be able to take over much of that work. But they may begin to ask more carefully what they are willing to work for. They may look for work that gives them more than an income: **freedom, meaning, fulfilment and the feeling that what they do makes a difference**. And perhaps now is exactly the time to think about which side we want to escape to. Not away from work. But towards work that fits the life we want to live tomorrow. The career question of the future may therefore no longer be: **“What is secure?”** But rather: **“What is worth giving my lifetime to?”**

When the Storm Subsides

Perhaps, then, we are not only facing a technological revolution. But a human one. If work eventually takes up less space in our lives, we will have to fill that space with something new. Relationships. Community. Creativity. Care. Curiosity. Engagement. Perhaps simply with time. When I came home this morning, the wind had not died down. The trees were still swaying, the dogs were happy, and my hair had officially given up any attempt at cooperation. The storm was still there. But perhaps we do not only have to save ourselves from the storm of our time. And perhaps we need to learn something that a performance-driven society finds surprisingly difficult: **A person does not have to be needed in order to be valuable.**

Perhaps, in the end, it is not about which side we escape to – but about which side we create for ourselves.

The Switch Column by Monica Deters

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