

„Switch-Happens“

Switch-Column by Monica Deters

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



When your Job disappears!

What happens to a person when not only their job disappears, but eventually even the prospect of finding another one?



When a 56-year-old grown man sits in front of you and cries because he cannot find another job, it hits me right in the heart. He has worked all his life. Taken responsibility. Earned his own living. And now he writes one application after another. Rejections. No response. Another application. At some point, he says something that really stays with me: **“What am I supposed to do now?”** And I realise: he is no longer just talking about his next job application. He is talking about his life.

I myself have lost my job three times through no fault of my own. I know that overwhelming feeling when, from one day to the next, your entire livelihood suddenly collapses. But back then, despite all the despair, I always had one certainty: somehow, somewhere, I would find something again.

Today I wonder: **What happens to us when even that certainty disappears?**

Just a Moment Ago, Life Was Still in Order

You had tasks, appointments, colleagues, responsibilities, status. And suddenly, there is this strange empty space in the morning. Then something begins that I have observed in many people. Some immediately switch into fight mode. Update the CV. Search job portals. Write applications. Anything to get back into working life as quickly as possible. But there are others who slowly begin to lose their rhythm and structure. It happens gradually. They get up later. The days become less defined. Tasks disappear. At some point, temporary unemployment turns into a state in which they begin to expect less and less from life itself. Both reactions are human.

But today, there is something new: **What if the next job simply never comes?**

Until Now, the Answer to Unemployment Was Pretty Simple

Find another job. That is exactly what I did back then. Again and again. Almost frantically. And it always worked. Although I had to fight harder each time. But what happens if, for more and more people, this answer no longer works in this new era? AI and automation are changing our world of work. Tasks are disappearing, professions are changing, and new jobs do not necessarily emerge where old ones disappear.

What Happens to a Person

What happens to someone who makes an effort, writes applications, remains flexible – and still cannot find anything? Eventually, it is not only the income that is missing. And of course, money is no minor issue. Rent, electricity, insurance and food cannot be paid for with meaning and joy in life. We should not sugar-coat that reality. How we will secure our livelihoods in the future if paid employment genuinely becomes less available is one of the great unresolved questions of our time – and one that politics and society urgently need to address.

But Something Else Happens, Too

The sense of purpose disappears. We need something to get up for in the morning. Work gives our lives far more than money. It gives structure to our days. We are needed. We have colleagues, responsibilities and small moments of achievement. And in the evening, there is that feeling: **I accomplished something today.** When that disappears, it leaves a gap that we talk about far too little. Perhaps we therefore need to start distinguishing between **paid work and meaningful activity.** Or find ways to combine the two. Either way, human beings need a sense of purpose in their lives. **It Makes Me Think of Beppo, the Street Sweeper from Michael Ende's "Momo".** For him, sweeping his street was not simply work. It was a task he

approached with calmness and dedication, one that gave meaning to his day. And that will become increasingly important in the future. Our phones give us endless opportunities to stay occupied through social media or online games. But how fulfilling is that at the end of the day? So what can fulfil us? A new job? Volunteering? A personal project? Learning? Sport? Animals? Gardening? Craftsmanship? Creativity? Supporting other people? A small business of our own? Or perhaps something we did not even know a year ago could bring us joy? Not as a way of simply keeping ourselves busy. But as an answer to the question: **What gives my life meaning, structure and joy today?**

For decades, we have learned how to prepare ourselves for work. School. Vocational training. University. Further education. Career. But hardly anyone has taught us how to create a fulfilling life when paid employment suddenly takes up less space in it. Perhaps that will become one of the great challenges of our new era. And that is why we will also need people who can guide others through these transitions. People who do not simply say, "Just keep applying." But people who help others find a new place, a new purpose and perhaps even a new vision for their own lives. And that is exactly what I wish for this 56-year-old man: that he not only finds another job, but also rediscovers his inner peace – even if his life continues in a different direction from the one he had imagined.

Because being unemployed must never mean becoming lifeless. Quite the opposite. A job can disappear. Our purpose can change. But our life is still waiting to be shaped. Perhaps the defining question of the future will therefore no longer be only: **Where can I work?** But: **What do I get up for in the morning?**

The Switch Column by Monica Deters

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