

The Robots are ready. Humans are not.

About work, dignity and the question of who we are when achievement no longer defines our lives.



For 17 years, Herbert has come to this office every morning. He puts down his bag, turns on his computer, gets himself a coffee, cracks a little joke with his colleagues and starts his working day. He knows the voices in the corridor, his boss's quirks and every damn folder in his cupboard.

Herbert comes to the office today, too. But today, he does not turn on his computer. Today, there is a cardboard box on his desk. And now, an entire working life is supposed to fit inside it.

Herbert takes the framed photograph from his desk. Packs away his coffee mug. Opens the drawers. Pens. Headache tablets. Chocolate bars. Old business cards. All those little personal things that, over time, turned a workplace into his own personal space.

Then he goes to the cupboards. What belongs to him? What stays here? Eventually, everything is empty. The desk. The drawers. The cupboard. Only Herbert is still there. Holding a cardboard box in his arms and with a damn big lump in his throat. Because now he understands: today, he is not only losing his job. He is losing his purpose. His colleagues. His status. His good reputation. His financial security. And something that is never mentioned in a termination letter: a part of his identity. Because suddenly, it is not only his livelihood that is being shaken. His dignity is being shaken, too. Yesterday, he was still "Herbert from the development department". Today, he is Herbert. Just Herbert.

I know this moment myself. Three times in my life, I lost my job through no fault of my own. Every time because of "force majeure". Yes. Force is the right word. Because you take far more home with you

than a cardboard box filled with your belongings. You take questions home with you: Who am I now? What am I still worth? And who needs me anymore?

We talk all the time about AI and robots. But this is also about people. In the coming years, thousands upon thousands of people could experience their own Herbert moment. With one crucial difference: their job may not be taken by another person. But by a machine. Humanoid robots are walking through factory halls. AI writes, calculates, programs, analyses and already performs tasks that people spent years training to do.

We discuss productivity, efficiency and new jobs. But the much bigger question is: What happens to a person when their work is no longer needed? After all, for decades we have taught people: Work hard. Achieve something. Be productive. Make yourself useful. And now we are developing machines that can take over precisely those achievements. Technologically impressive. Humanly explosive.

And to be absolutely clear: I am in favour of this progress. I think it is wonderful when machines take over difficult, monotonous or dangerous work, and when AI creates possibilities we could only dream of a few years ago. But amid all the excitement about what machines will soon be able to do, we must not forget what people will need. How do you tell millions of people: "We no longer need your work"? And how do we prevent them from hearing: "We no longer need you"? There are only two little words between those two statements. But for a human being, there can be an entire world between them.

Of course, new professions will emerge. People will retrain and learn new skills. Work will not simply disappear. But it will change. And we need to prepare people for that change not only professionally. But emotionally.

We need a new understanding of what makes a life valuable. We need to relearn that our worth does not depend on how much we produce or achieve. Perhaps we will create more instead of simply completing tasks. Care for others. Learn. Help. Build communities. Give children our time. Listen to older people. Develop our own projects. Take different jobs. Have crazy ideas. Because we are not only experiencing a technological revolution. We are facing a historic shift: from a performance-driven society to a life-centred society. A society in which work will continue to have its place. But will no longer determine the place a human being has within it.

Right now, we are teaching robots how to walk, grasp, speak, think and work alongside us. **But who is teaching us humans how to live alongside them?** Perhaps the end of work as we know it is therefore not the end of our significance, but the beginning of a life we simply never had time for before.

Prosperity needs a new definition. Until now, we have measured it primarily by what we own, what we earn and what we can afford. But what if, in the future, prosperity also means having time? "Time" may one day become what money is today: a sign that we are doing well.

But then we need to prepare the Herberts of this world for the moment when they walk through the office door carrying their cardboard box. So that they do not think: Nobody needs me anymore. But instead, one day, they can say: My job is gone. But I am still here. And what lies ahead of me is not only the search for a new job. What lies ahead of me is a new life.

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