Relevance

Grappling with technology and platforms

What we heard

Machines are excellent at pattern recognition and following rules at scale. With the help of humans and increasingly with the help of other machines, they automate, operationalize, sort and categorize everything from people to pistons to press releases.

Machines can strip people of their dignity and alienate them from their work, and they can save lives and anticipate unforeseen dangers.

In our conversations, we asked people to reflect on the role of technology and machines in their lives. Unsurprisingly, people's thoughts and feelings about technology are, "It depends."

"[The rideshare company] doesn't care. I was working for them full-time last year. Now I'm not. You think anybody cares? … You don't hear from them. If, on your regular job, you don't show up and no one hears from you, normally, someone is gonna call and go, 'Well, what'd you do? Did you quit?'

When you work for them, they communicate with you all the time. How do you like driving for [the company]? What do you think? You work for something invisible. … I don't think anyone that works there ever sees a person behind the wheel."

Dana

The tangible and the abstract

The coexistence of information technology and humans, where functions are increasingly more automated, was a topic that resonated with several of our participant collaborators. Dana shared how, as a rideshare driver with nearly every function fully automated, she felt removed from authentic human connection when it came to the platform. The upside was she felt she could leave all feedback about her experience as a driver on the platform without fear of retaliation. The downside was she felt she was an expendable resource and easy to replace. As she explained, this is what people have come to expect when they "work for something invisible."

As an employee of a traditional taxi company, where she worked for 30 years as a dispatcher, Dana has deep knowledge of how the taxi business works. Based on her experiences, she's able to draw informed comparisons between the two experiences — analogue versus digital. In the traditional model, if she missed a day of work, her co-workers would call to check in to see if everything was okay. Working for the rideshare company, all interaction takes place on the screen.

For Dana, rideshare is an "investors game." "They pay their investors. . . . The services that they provide or the people that they use are kind of immaterial." Dana notes the hourly rate hasn't gone up in years, and the time between pick-ups has been shortened. "When you're working by the hour and using your own vehicle, the longer rides and additional wear and tear make it much less profitable."

So, what keeps her there? Being able to pay her bills while avoiding taking early retirement and social security penalties is one reason. The other is the satisfaction she gets from providing her riders with a worry-free service experience. In every job she's held, her sense of dignity and purpose has been deeply rooted in her service to the people most impacted by her work. She might be paid by an algorithm, but she's **working for people.**

Many of us orient to work as something tangible, as an activity with distinct physical properties. In a very real sense, work is a set of embodied practices. Whether it's mopping a floor, swinging a hammer, sitting in commuter traffic or writing a report, there is a definite physical and practical component to work. For many of us, it's quite literally how work gets done.

Sharon

In our conversations with Sharon, the fine-dining pastry chef turned café entrepreneur, work has always been about manual labor. As far back as she can remember, she thought of work as something you do with your hands.

"I honestly don't even know what people who work in offices do. I have no clue what that is. [For] me, work has always been a tangible thing. Like, it's you're cutting glass, or you're cooking.

Some people would look down upon them and say that they're unskilled labor, that anybody can do it. But that's what work is. It's producing a thing. It's your hands on something."

Fred

Sharon is far from alone in this orientation to work. We heard similar stories from Fred, a caretaker, and Georgina, a maker. They each use their hands to produce something uniquely personalized for customers at a small scale. Work is both an activity and an outcome.

While Sharon and Georgina, both in their 30s, are finding different ways to use digital technologies in their work. Fred, in his late 60s, is not inclined to do so. For him, it's all about the tangible human connections made through physical effort and skill. In his words, technology is making people "too relaxed."

Fred explained, "Letting technology, letting machines do the work that you're supposed to be doing ... it's getting to the point where people are not [doing the work]. What are they going to do if that's all they know?"

He shared the example of his younger neighbors who rarely cook meals because they usually order food from delivery platforms. He finds this trend of technology dependency "scary." He very consciously continues to operate at a scale where person-to-person interactions are prioritized in the kind of work he does.

His sense of identity, like that of Dana's, remains deeply tied to his commitment to quality service. It is his personal philosophy that "simpler is better," both in terms of material and emotional rewards. As a result, Fred views his life as one of abundance.

Katherine

Others, like Katherine, struggle to come to terms with conflicting feelings around old and new ways of working.

In Katherine's case, a lot of it comes down to having watched as her dad worked multiple jobs while her mom worked the night shift as a nurse's assistant in order to support the family. As a second-generation American, she was taught that hard work, dedication and a good education would be the key to "not getting left behind" in America.

As a teenager around the time of the Great Recession, Katherine was aware from the news that lots of people were losing what they had worked so hard for — homes, savings and job security. That reality was driven home when she went to interview for a summer job at a local sandwich shop. When she got there, the line was out the door and down the sidewalk. She described how sad it was for her to see middle-aged people in business attire holding briefcases, waiting their turn to apply. The memory of this moment has stayed with her. And it continues to inform how she thinks about work in terms of tangibility and abstraction.

"So much of what [my dad] does is super, super physical and super manual and super laborious. And I don't know, there's something so cushy about sitting behind a computer and printing money." Katherine is referring to her foray into day trading. She describes how, while dressed in her pajamas at the computer, she was able to make many times over what her father was able to earn in a week of "hard labor." Did she really earn this money? Is it work when it's not physically demanding? Would making money successfully in this way cause a rift between her and her parents? Should she feel guilty about opting for a technology-enabled, more abstract way of making money, as opposed to her parents' more tangible approach?

These are the kinds of questions that run through Katherine's mind as she continues to experiment with different ways of working and making an income. Breaking with the conventions around work in which her parents participate — largely out of necessity — Katherine remains conflicted, however; she recently learned that her father had also begun to dabble in day trading, which helped to diffuse some, but not all, of her guilt about what is and is not work.

“As globalization happens, as workforce automation happens, as artificial intelligence becomes more and more prevalent, I think it’s going to reshape the working world faster. The pace of change is just accelerating.”

—Asa

Rapid obsolescence

People of all ages and occupations are feeling the pressure to remain relevant in the face of increased technical know-how, automation and the rapid digitized takeover of jobs, or parts of jobs, at scale.

Confronted by these realities, what it means to be human is cast into high relief.

Paul

Paul is a lifelong techie who believes that technology is essentially a good thing but that we aren't necessarily good stewards of it. Or, at the very least, as a society, we are not keeping pace with how to best manage technology for improving lives.

He describes the silicon chip as the "second wheel." He believes there is nothing more significant that humans have invented than the wheel. For him, it really comes down to how we chose to apply this new "wheel."

Paul is a technology optimist. While he's excited about the future of technology, especially blockchain technologies, he also believes that it's a young person's "game." Paul is approaching retirement after a successful career in technology entrepreneurship. Even with decades of experience, Paul doesn't feel he is still qualified to manage engineering teams because of how fast tech changes. While he doesn't plan to remove himself completely from the field, he believes he's more suited to an advisory role on a board.

> "It's not that the computing is reaching levels of advancement that maybe it shouldn't or something like that. It's that society is not keeping pace. So, I think it's more the effect of the lag than the effect of the advancement."

Like so many things, timing is everything.

For Paul, the past couple of years have been an ongoing learning experience. He's become aware that his skills as a grandfather are more meaningful than ever. He's working on his emotional intelligence as he expands his sense of identity into more than a "person in technology."

Paul attributes this realignment to the opportunity to share time with his young grandchild during the pandemic. Through this experience, he began to appreciate what he's been missing by devoting so much of his time to work. Instead of aspiring to produce the next great idea and bring it to market, he's focused on being a more well-rounded person, a person who is more present for his family while pursuing activities that he finds deeply rewarding.

"The best I can be is the best grandfather I can be. My sights have been changed completely about doing something that's larger than myself. Something that's more important is no longer equated with business or wanting to make my mark or to be known in history. I've completely changed those expectations to wanting to be known most warmly by my grandchildren rather than wanting to be known for something I did in business."

His sights have changed. What's most important to Paul is no longer his work. What he describes as a kind of obsolescent relationship to his professional expertise has freed him to be more relevant and present in other areas of his life.

Acting like machines

When it comes to deploying human expertise at scale through automation, we might ask ourselves:

- What is being optimized?
- What are the personal and social costs?

Doctor J.

Dr. J is finishing his OBGYN residency. We asked him about the impact of technology on his work. While he couldn't imagine that a mother would trust a robot to deliver a baby, he did know of colleagues whose fields of medicine are increasingly being automated. He specifically mentioned radiology, oncology and certain surgical procedures.

He also shared that, although the OBGYN field may not be directly impacted by robots and other high-tech machines, his day-to-day work is.

Dr. J describes being tethered to a tablet while seeing patients instead of spending meaningful time with people who need his care. The tablet is connected to insurance companies and billing codes, which then dictate what he and the hospital can bill and, ultimately, the treatments offered and how personalized the appointment will be.

As a professional who prides himself in a more "humanistic" approach to patient care, Dr. J is willing to sacrifice "time efficiency, maximum capacity, volume, volume, volume" and "becoming a machine," even when it means less billables.

It's an ongoing balancing act between insurance codes, hospital policy, billing, and the patient-practitioner relationship. Instead of being completely at the mercy of systems — technological and institutional — Dr. J is pushing back by reasserting himself as a "thinking, feeling person."

And he told us he is not alone. Social media has provided the opportunity to build communities for doctors like him to challenge being made to "act like machines." He is hopeful that, the more people give voice to their experiences working in healthcare, the more pressure will be added to the system to change.

For Dr. J, human connection is essential to practicing medicine.

“[A] very senior leader, part of the company, asked me how much of this [empathy-based] methodology could we automate? And I was like, ‘None of it!’”

—Marnie

Athena

Athena's experience of getting lost in the "endless loop" of a system designed to "promote" honest employee feedback is just one example of the potential for automation to create disconnects.

The corporate values encourage employees to "do the right thing" and "be human, be kind." But during the height of the pandemic and with no members coming to the workspace, Athena asked to work from home one day a week to care for her three young children. Her employer said no. Then she was invited to share her feedback. She got lost in an automated feedback loop.

From the earliest days of working for this company, Athena was told that she mattered, that the company culture fully supported human connection and that her thoughts were valued. But when she tried to offer those thoughts, there were no humans to receive them. With no way to escape the endless interface runaround, Athena left feeling deeply disrespected and demoralized.

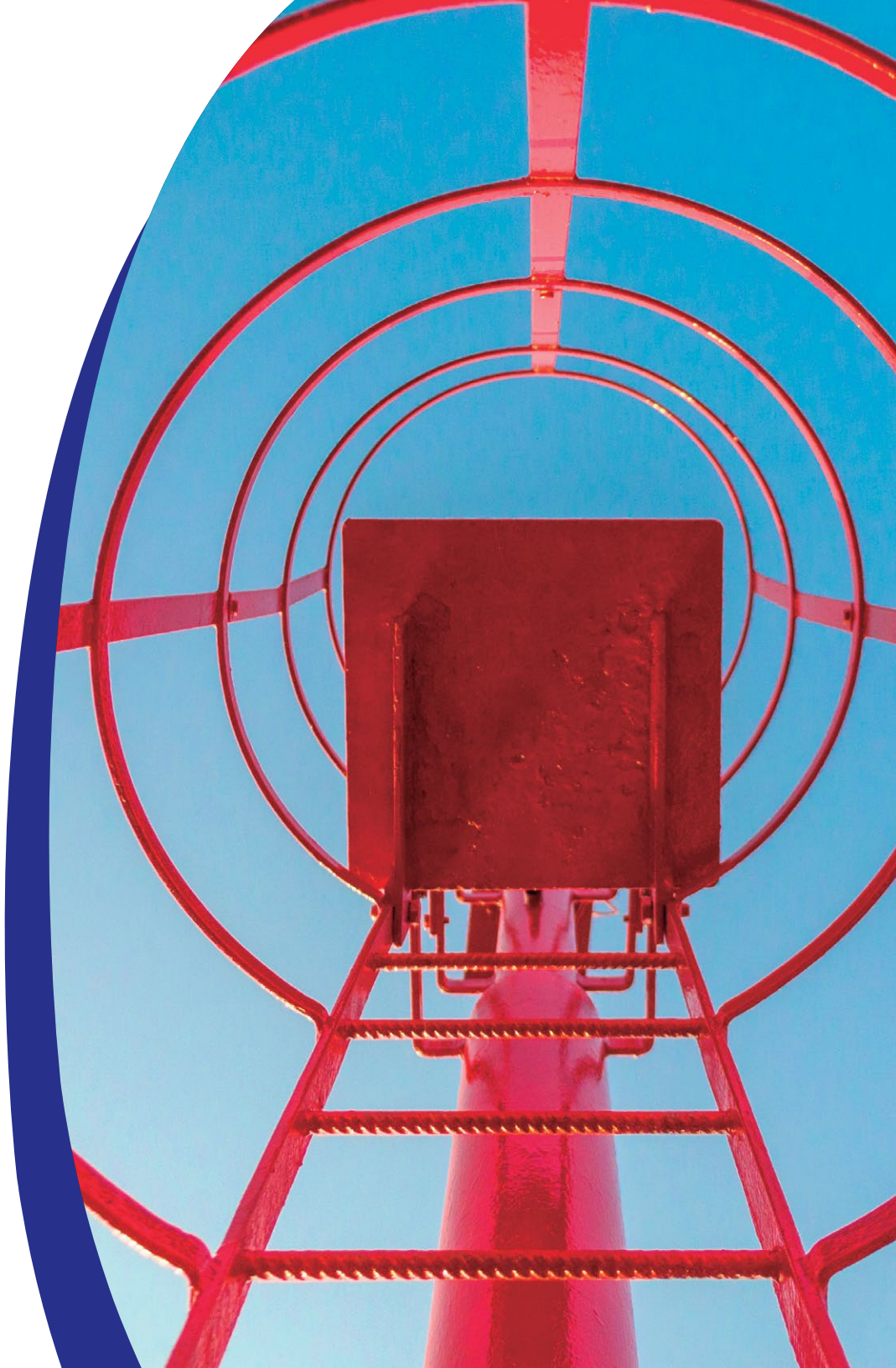
> "Please refer to our connect page, which is found here, and it's a little link, and you click on it, and it tells you the same BS that you've been sent an email about. And I was just like, 'Nobody's gonna hear me out on this.'"

Self-platforming

The exponential growth of digital technologies supporting creators as producers is significant.

For those relying on social media as engagement and selling channels, the question of how to present yourself in the digital world is essential.

For some, it's a deep dive into new forms of technology and relationships, while for others, it feels like being thrown off the deep end.



Curated self-exposure is part of many people's work, along with the posts, likes, followers, views, customers, haters and fans that come with it. We will continue to explore performance of self and a set of work practices in upcoming research.

For this inaugural research on work and identity, we spoke to several small-business owners who use social media as the primary channels to showcase their wares and drive sales. For some, it's magic. For others, it's a game. And still, others view social media as a necessary evil.

Ariana

Ariana uses social media to bring attention to her art. Although she does make the effort to create posts instead of simply saying, "It's all on my website," she does it halfheartedly. Not quite 30, she feels that she isn't up to speed on all the techniques people use to generate greater engagement.

For Ariana, her art and the ways engagement is created must be aligned. Otherwise, she won't do them, even if they would help the overall performance of her platform.

> "Overwhelmingly, I think self-platforming is something that I'm always gonna have to work on. It's never gonna be as strong as other things that I have been cultivating. It's less of my comfort zone, for sure."

Jayne

Jayne is trying to let go of her longing for the career she once had in television while working hard to build a presence on social media. She describes missing the predictability and routine of a broadcaster; she always knew what she needed to do next. And she was good at it. Now, she's confronted by constant multitasking between business administration, webcasting, promotions and business development. At times, she simply doesn't know what to do next, which she finds overwhelming and daunting.

Up until her late 30s, Jayne's career path was reasonably linear as she built a career in broadcasting. She started in a smaller market and focused on moving into progressively larger ones. Through dedication and hard work, she achieved what she had always wanted to be — a known television news personality with a national following.

But age, especially for women, was an important factor in her line of work. Eventually, she was laid off from her company.

Now, in her early 40s she's trying to use her skills reporting live to create a profitable online presence as a multimedia host.

She still is not sure what to say when someone asks, "What do you do?" In the past, she had a clear sense of her professional identity. She had a title with status and was working for an organization with standing. It was easy to say, "I'm a news anchor." Now, with so many different roles, she doesn't know how to describe her work and role. She's trying to figure it out as she goes and, in the process, find identities — work and personal — she can feel proud of.

> "You asked what I miss about TV. And aside from the actual act of doing it, I miss being in a studio ... that workplace camaraderie, interactions with other people. I mean, it's nice that I have more control. But it's just a lot more work, a lot more brain power, just a lot more balls to juggle."

Georgina

In contrast to Jayne, who is grappling with her feelings around professional identity and relevance, Georgina is an artist who makes jewelry and sells it online. She feels liberated by the digital opportunities available to her because it gives her the freedom to make her own choices.

"I feel like I'm really grateful to be in a position right now where my career, the way that I make my living, is my dream situation. I just make stuff, and people purchase it from me. I can make a living in my house, which feels really kind of magical."

Georgina operates at a scale where she feels most comfortable. Her specialty is making one-of-a-kind, handcrafted jewelry. She also curates historical period clothing collections for sale. She has a robust and growing online following and still can't believe how "miraculous [it is] that I can make six grand in two minutes."

Georgina celebrates the freedom that digital platforms afford her to do what she loves and reach many people who would not otherwise see her work.

Georgina's experience selling online is different than Jayne's, partly because Georgina is selling things she has made, while Jayne is selling her skills. For Jayne, no matter how hard she works at building her online personal brand, she's yet to find the sense of elevated professional identity she previously enjoyed.

Georgina cares more about making a life with her partner, a cobbler. They both love their crafts and are thrilled to be able to make a living doing work that is meaningful for them. Being able to reach their customers online makes living their dreams possible.

Others see social media and other digital platforms as opportunities to be discovered and enjoyed by people who are interested in what they are doing. It's more about using a new tool effectively than trying to build a new identity.

Insights to consider

Technology changes faster than people do.

While the goal of most technology is to make things easier and better for people, the relentless focus on efficiency and productivity in techology needs to account for the people who use it. In the rush to create new tools that count, sort, categorize and rank, it's important to think about the people impacted.

Patients don't care about insurance codes. Passengers who use ride-sharing just want to feel safe and get to where they need to go. Even people who have worked in technology for years are rethinking whether they want to keep up with all the changes or spend more time connecting with the people they love.

People are not machines, and computers aren't sentient.

The fundamental things that make people happy are uniquely human and involve freedom, autonomy, relationships, learning and connection with other living things.

We will never automate empathy. But that doesn't mean that empathy, compassion, kindness and human connection are not essential to humans and how they interact with technology.

Conversation starters

Technology and humans

- What is it like to use the technology we ask people to use at work?
- How often does the technology change, and how are the users and work affected?
- Who has control over how technology impacts the work? What aspects of our products and services are handled solely by technology?
- Do we trust technology over humans? Why and under what circumstances does that make sense?
- When is it essential for humans to be involved and make decisions?

Humans and work

- Have we considered how to make a more human-friendly workplace? Or have we been focused on allocating space and resources in the most effective manner?
- What is the difference between these approaches for the work we do here?
- Do we understand where our employees are experiencing stress or difficulty?
- What is causing it?
- Can we make a difference in the areas where people are feeling stressed? What would that look like?
- What is success here, and how do we measure it?
- Are we measuring what matters?
- What are the trade-offs?
- How do our policies and communications convey our expectations about the role of work in people's lives?