

2025 SBA-GSIM Colloquium

Imagining the Distant Future of Work

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Abstract

What will the future of work look like? All throughout history, people have been imagining and telling stories about the future—driven, it seems, in equal parts by hope and fear. Currently, the fourth industrial revolution—characterized by a fusion of technologies blurring the lines between the physical, the digital, and the biological—is projected to bring about changes in the world of work so disruptive in scope and so exponential in pace, that they have no historical precedent. That said, not everyone agrees on the nature and implications of the changes on the horizon. Generally speaking, three groups can be identified in the public debate: optimists, pessimists, and sceptics. While optimists tend to focus on the potential of new technologies to augment human labor, pessimists focus on the threat of automation and the massive job loss that would come with it. Similarly, while some believe that economic inequality will only increase as a result of the fourth industrial revolution, others believe that governments will introduce a universal basic income to compensate for the loss of jobs caused by automation—in the process also creating a new societal model. Sceptics, finally, believe that claims about the velocity and scope of projected transformations in the world of work are vastly exaggerated, and that the future will look more or less like the present, with a few tweaks here and there. So, which group of experts is right? The answer is probably ‘none of them’.

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