

Jeremy Rifkin's THE END OF WORK

Communities, corporations, & governments must harness the power of technology to serve the common good

DAVID DRISCOLL

Technology, demographics, and the pernicious effects of monetary policy are but three of the current explanations for the stubbornly high rate of labour displacement. In *The End of Work*, Jeremy Rifkin is clear. If it's a horse race and you can choose only one explanatory factor, choose technology and go home a winner virtually every night.

Technology is a social product. It comes about as a result of a web of social processes including education, training, and incentives.

Technology can pay handsome dividends. But it is a wild card. We need to decide how to play it and how to enjoy its benefits. Currently the benefits are being almost entirely privatized with destructive economic and social consequences for everybody, sooner or later.

Every business/industry that introduces technology and lays off staff produces a result which is individually efficient and collectively destructive. The aggregate effect of this method is to progressively shrink purchasing power in our community and thereby the ability of people to be the customers for our goods and services. Great wealth, great poverty - no economic activity.

To make technology serve human well-being requires action from three key institutional players. The private, public, and community sectors are the "legs of the stool" that create balance in society and economy. The private sector builds private capital through energy innovation, and investment. The public sector builds public capital and acts to regulate on behalf of the common good. The community sector is the web of our social/community institutions which build the very fabric of our lives together. It makes products like trust, tolerance, and opportunity - prerequisites for the very existence of the other two sectors.

Rifkin calls on all three sectors to embrace a wide variety of collaborative strategies to redistribute the benefits of technological innovation.

The private sector has a collective interest in ensuring that its business customers have continuing purchasing power. It therefore

needs to work with government to build a jobs and growth strategy. Unions must continue to create community purchasing power by negotiating higher wages, shorter work weeks, and better working conditions. The use of investment capital in labour pension funds creates another lever of influence and power. Rifkin also vigorously advocates the tremendous opportunities for growth in paid employment which the community sector offers.

Rifkin's analytic role is widely acknowledged. Equally widely acknowledged is the fragility of this prescriptions for action. But analysis is what we principally need him for. He can be a "visiting sage" and advocate, and then it's proper for him to move on, having motivated us to do what ultimately rests with us anyway. We need to come together as sectors and communities, build on our assets, and shape our future together. For even the most ingenious action plan to work, those who have to make and live with the changes have to "own" the plan. Visiting sages cannot and should not displace that critical building function.

Books pitched at private sector corporations are far too frequently flavour-of-the-month, trendy, change-your-attitude, pop explanations with "one minute" catch phrases.

This is not the cold water of fact that Rifkin splashes in on our face. In clear, accessible language, he marshals his data and examples to extend the path on which we are walking, moving us out over the precipice before bringing us back to our current situation. Rifkin's evidence and advocacy to act are compelling. ↵

To order *The End of Work* (\$21.50) contact The CED Bookshop, CCE Publications, 4656 Margaret Street, Port Alberni, B.C. V9Y 6H2 (toll free) 888-255-6779 (fax) 250-723-1922.

Executive director of the Vancity Community Foundation, DAVID DRISCOLL maintains an active interest in the relationship between technology and social change, the subject of his masters thesis.

Over the past 20 years he has also served in a variety of elected capacities, including that of mayor of Port Moody, B.C.