

# The Possibility Of A Dark, Frightening Side To The Future Of Work

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Jack Kelly, *Forbes*, February 2, 2021



There could be a dark side to the future of work. The adverse effects of the pandemic may restructure society—and not in the way we want. The rich will get richer and the middle class and poor will face grave financial and career challenges.

We'll see the emergence of tech-savvy, Orwellian corporations spying on you. There's a strong possibility that we're fast heading toward a new medieval feudalistic society, as people will be thrust unwillingly into the gig economy, contract work and forced into retirement—due to lack of alternatives. Workers will need to cope with chronic underemployment and unemployment.

## Returning To A Medieval Feudalistic Society

As the job-loss crisis continues to grow and millions of people desperately look for work, corporate management will have the upper hand. They'll require a lot and won't feel the need to pay well. It will be easy for bosses to fire workers, as they know there will be a long line of people waiting for a job. Wages will remain stubbornly low and benefits inadequate since management won't worry about competing for talent.

## Tapping Into America's Best-Kept Future Of Work Secret

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The pre-Covid-19 world feels like a lifetime ago. Before the outbreak, the U.S. boasted a record-high employment rate. There was a war to attract workers. Now, the tables have turned. There is a huge supply of people looking for work. Corporations are asserting their power.

We used to herald the “essential workers” and “heroes” who labored on the frontlines, working in warehouses, delivering food, stocking shelves and other jobs interacting with people and risking their health. Now, companies don’t seem to care anymore.

The trend will be firing full-time, permanent employees, in favor of independent contractors, like Instacart, the tech-based company, just did. Uber, Lyft and an array of other tech companies heavily rely upon gig workers, as they don’t have to pay them salaries, nor offer benefits, sick days and vacation days. In their eyes, these workers are disposable and replaceable.

If this trend continues on its current fast trajectory, the United States will look like a medieval feudalistic country. There will be a small number of incredibly wealthy and powerful oligarchs, like Jeff Bezos, controlling mostly everything. They’ll be supported by a coterie of top lawyers, accountants and managers. Then, there will be the large pool of the underclass doing all of the dirty jobs for low pay, at the cost of personal health risks.

## **The Rich Will Get Richer**

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The pandemic has swiftly increased wealth and income inequality. Online companies, such as Amazon, Google, Facebook, Netflix, Microsoft, Apple and Zoom, have performed amazingly well and the executives and shareholders were richly rewarded. Other sectors, such as those in the hotel, travel, hospitality, airlines and brick-and-mortar retail shopping, have done poorly.

We’ve seen a K-shaped recovery, in which the wealthy are getting ridiculously richer. Billionaires have reaped unfathomable amounts of more money. For instance, Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg are now members of the \$100 billion-plus club. This is happening as millions of average Americans have lost their jobs and many families struggle to make ends meet.

White-collar professionals who were able to work from home did relatively well, whereas those in low-wage jobs—who couldn’t—have lost out. The trend of the rich getting richer looks like it will keep going strong. Meanwhile, small businesses will continue to get crushed and many will permanently close, as they cannot compete with the digital online giants and suffer from being ordered to lockdown or curtail their business operations.

Senior-level people who work for near-monopolies, like Facebook, stand to keep winning. Workers in nontech companies or hard-hit industries, including hospitality, airlines and retail stores, will continue to struggle.

## **Your Company Will Be Spying On You**

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Americans working from home are concerned that their companies are spying on them. The *New York Times* reported, “Demand has surged for software that can monitor employees, with programs tracking the words we type, snapping pictures with our computer cameras and giving our managers rankings of who is spending too much time on Facebook and not enough on Excel.”

“Employees who are now subject to new levels of surveillance report being both ‘incredibly stressed out’ by the constant monitoring and also afraid to speak up, a recipe for not only dissatisfaction but also burnout, both of which—ironically—decrease productivity,” wrote the *Harvard Business Review*.

New studies show that “a staggering one in five companies has already installed monitoring software to spy on their employees while working from home” or “plan to do so” without letting them know. The *Guardian* wrote that its reporters “found firms requiring webcams and microphones be activated all day, with some going a step further and using bespoke spyware to follow their employees’ online activities during work hours.” They predicted, “With many companies looking to cut costs and to closer evaluate their staffing productivity, the phenomenon of employee monitoring has been accelerated by the pandemic, but it is likely to long outlast it.”

Since the technology is readily available and relatively inexpensive, it’s natural to believe that the spying will continue unabated. Bosses will freely take screenshots of employees’ screens, install stealth monitoring features, check instant messages, tap into their mobile devices, have remote controls on desktops, check the keystrokes to ensure you’re at your desk, surveillance cameras to see if you’ve left the office and for how long, review your calendar and secretly video record you during the day.

## **Technology, Robots And Artificial Intelligence Will Take Away Millions Of Jobs**

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The World Economic Forum (WEF) concluded in a report that “a new generation of smart machines, fueled by rapid advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics, could potentially replace a large proportion of existing human jobs.”

The study suggests robotics and AI will cause a serious “double-disruption,” as the pandemic has pushed companies to fast-track the deployment of new technologies to slash costs, enhance productivity and be less reliant on real-life people. Millions of people have lost their jobs due to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and now the machines will wipe out more jobs, according to the WEF. The organization claims automation will supplant about 85 million jobs by 2025. It’s believed that the balance will dramatically change to a 50-50 combination of humans and machines.

In a dire prediction, WEF said, “While some new jobs would be created as in the past, the concern is there may not be enough of these to go round, particularly as the cost of smart machines falls over time and their capabilities increase.”

For those people who lack the skills, experience, education and background suited for the future needs of companies, they'll get left behind. Older workers may throw in the towel, give up and self-select out of the labor force and retire. Others, who lack the essential tools to succeed, may find themselves perennially underemployed and must contend with long bouts of chronic unemployment.

## **The Downside To The Work-From-Anywhere Trend**

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There's a frightening downside to the work-from-home trend, the emergence of digital nomads and getting rid of the location-based salary system. Job seekers will be forced to contend with more competition.

Up until now, candidates only worried about the other people in their immediate vicinity applying for the same jobs. Now, they'll have to compete with the volume of applicants applying from all over the U.S. and possibly other countries.

Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg and Twitter's Jack Dorsey have both said that they'll seek out talent anywhere. This tactic is good for their respective companies, as they could recruit for the best people across the country and around the world.

While it opens up the ability for job hunters to apply to companies no matter where they're based, they'll have to compete with hundreds—if not thousands—of other job seekers.

There are fast-growing trends that will shape the future of jobs. The *Wall Street Journal* predicts—based upon its research and an in-depth report by the U.S. Department of Labor—as the American population gets older and technology continues to dominate, there will be a plethora of new, exciting and high-paying opportunities in these sectors.