

# Putting People at the Center: The OECD's *I Am the Future* of Work Campaign

By Anthony Gooch

**A**t the OECD, when we talk about work and jobs, we usually talk in numbers. We say, for example, that on average, people in OECD member countries who have a college degree are 26 percent more likely to have a job than those who didn't finish high school. We say that 40 percent of all new jobs created between 2005 and 2016 were in digitally intensive sectors, and that 14 percent of jobs will be radically reshaped — or replaced — by automation in the next 15 to 20 years.

But what do these numbers mean in real life? In reflecting on the profound changes that are reshaping how we live and work — from globalization and automation to new technologies such as artificial intelligence and big data — we have felt the need to remind both ourselves and the countries we serve of the human beings and the lives behind the numbers, putting real people at the center of the debate.

It was in this spirit that in April 2019 the OECD launched its *I Am the Future of Work* campaign. Our aim was to shift the debate around the future of work from a place of fear — that, for example, robots will replace us all, or that rewarding jobs are gone for good — to a place of realism and ambition. Through this campaign, we seek to combine different voices and solid data, human stories, and OECD insights. Also in sync with the human element is what drives the campaign — the OECD mission to deliver on “Better Policies for Better Lives”; we firmly believe that, with the right policies in place, we can build a future that works for everyone and in which all generations can thrive.

## Person-Centered Research

In 2019, our annual *OECD Employment Outlook* focused exclusively on the future of work, examining the forces that are changing jobs and labor markets, and their impact on education and training, working conditions, and the protections and benefits we may receive. Our findings underscored that a strong and inclusive future of work is not guaranteed. Indeed, the future of work is not some distant point from now; it's now, for now is when we create that future. Without

a clear policy agenda for managing it, there is a real risk that some workers might be left behind, especially those with few skills. Governments, businesses, and other partners will need to work together in many policy areas, from education and skills to labor market regulation and taxation. Most importantly, we will need to ensure that our efforts reach those who are in greatest need.

Alongside this analysis, we set out to learn more about how people's jobs and lives are changing. Keeping with our person-centered focus, we talked to ordinary citizens around the world and asked each of them: What is your hope for the future of work?

What we learned from those exchanges was invaluable. Masanori, a 75-year-old Japanese retired pharmaceuticals executive who keeps active by serving as a bicycle parking lot attendant, feels the future of work will be about helping everyone “enjoy good health and work longer.” Marc, an organic farmer in France, expects work to be less “alienating,” with people enabled to work more closely together. Milena, a small-business owner in Germany, imagines a future in which work “helps people to grow,” and in which people do the creative and relational tasks that artificial intelligence cannot. And Angie, a high school technology teacher in Skokie, Illinois, told us how connections are what make it possible for her students to imagine their own future of work. Every day she strives to help them “collaborate together and see that light bulb go off,” equipping them with the skills they need “to take the knowledge [teachers] give them and take it further.”

These stories, with certain common themes running throughout them, tell us what we all already know at some level: that while numbers matter and technology is changing seemingly everything, human beings still have a deep need to connect — to one another, and to their work. This has been echoed by the many contributions and comments we have received on our campaign website, where people from more than 50 countries have shared their hopes for the future of work.

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## Shaping the Future through Collaboration

At the OECD, we have a unique role in fostering connections of all kinds. We listen as well as advise. We bring together diverse stakeholders, from government to business to civil society, in order to identify and share good practices across countries and sectors. We are doing just that by partnering with organizations such as AARP, which has the capacity to reach out to millions and influence policy on issues like the multigenerational workforce, and WorldSkills, which can survey young people about their educational and professional aspirations.

Convening, listening, and partnering are at the heart of our campaign. In 2020, as part of an OECD Future of Work roadshow, we are undertaking a series of events around the world, including showcasing findings at our annual OECD Forum. These events will be a way for a wide range of stakeholders to join the conversation — from young people to workers nearing retirement, from HR specialists to educators, from academic experts to civil society practitioners, and from policy makers to businesses and trade unions.

Through the roadshows, we hope to gather a veritable constellation of the inspiring initiatives and ideas shaping the future of work as well as to map emerging issues and challenges. The conversations will help build a community of champions who can help keep the future of work at the very top of national agendas — champions who can, in their own way and in their

own national contexts, change attitudes and inspire policy actions.

The future of work isn't distant and it isn't abstract. I am the future of work and so are you. Our parents are the future of work and so are our children and grandchildren. We are all feeling the changes happening now, and change is likely to continue. We all need to join the conversation, starting now. We all need to come together to identify and implement solutions — so that we create a future that works for us all. ●



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