

**UK employment**

## Never mind the robots; future jobs demand human skills

In ageing nations, the fastest growing occupations are caring for others

**Sarah O'Connor**



YESTERDAY by: Sarah O'Connor

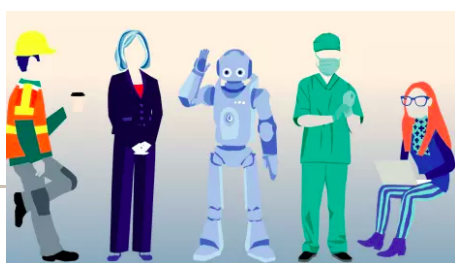
If you have read much about the future of work, you will have met the two noisy tribes that dominate the debate. First are the technofatalists, whose views were neatly [expressed \(http://www.pewinternet.org/2017/05/03/the-future-of-jobs-and-jobs-training/\)](http://www.pewinternet.org/2017/05/03/the-future-of-jobs-and-jobs-training/) by one expert who responded to a survey: “Seriously? You’re asking about the workforce of the future? As if there’s going to be one?” Second are the technofantasists for whom the future is filled with mind-bending [new jobs \(http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-3730501/Fancy-working-space-tour-guide-Report-predicts-jobs-future.html\)](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-3730501/Fancy-working-space-tour-guide-Report-predicts-jobs-future.html): “freelance biohacker”, “space tour guide”, “human body designer” to name but a few.

The undramatic truth is that many of the jobs of the future are also those of the present. Prime among them are jobs that involve humans looking after other humans. The [US Bureau of Labor Statistics \(https://www.bls.gov/emp/ep\\_table\\_103.htm\)](https://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_table_103.htm) has predicted the top 30 fastest-growing occupations for the next 10 years; more than half are some variety of nurse, therapist, healthcare worker or carer. This feels like a safe bet — and not just in the US.

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By 2030, there will be 34 “[super-aged \(https://www.ft.com/content/f356f8a0-1d8c-11e4-8f0c-00144feabdco\)](https://www.ft.com/content/f356f8a0-1d8c-11e4-8f0c-00144feabdco)” countries, where one person in five is over 65. Robots can help workers to look after these people but they cannot replace them, nor should we want them to. As the chief executive of Adidas pointed out recently, robots cannot even [lace shoes \(https://www.ft.com/content/39b353a6-263c-11e7-8691-d5f7e0cdoa16\)](https://www.ft.com/content/39b353a6-263c-11e7-8691-d5f7e0cdoa16) into trainers, let alone help a frail person into the shower. They do not possess any of the qualities that make humans good at caring for each other, like compassion, patience, humour and adaptability. On a trip to Japan I met a small table-top robot designed to keep elderly people company

and remind them to take their pills. It was cloying and depressing. If I had been left alone with it for a day, I would have tossed it out of the window.

Yet the debate about automation has revealed a strange truth. The jobs we humans are uniquely good at are often the jobs we do not value at all. Social care jobs, for example, are defined by economists everywhere as low-skilled or unskilled. For a chartered accountant taking part in a discussion on automation recently, this prompted an existential wobble: “It’s easier to automate me than a carer or a cleaner,” he said. “So am I *really* more skilled?”

It is a good question. Care work does not always require formal qualifications but it is difficult, responsible and demanding. Not everyone has the innate qualities to do it well.

Yet this is not how economists tend to define “skill” in a job. Most of the time, they use a proxy such as the level of education required to do the role, or simply how well it pays.

In social care, the pay is often low. Personal care and home health aides in the US make roughly \$23,000 a year on average. In Britain, a prolonged squeeze on public spending has had knock-on effects on care workers, many of whom work for private companies that rely on public sector contracts. In England last year, [43 per cent of care workers earned less \(https://www.ft.com/content/3eac5a0e-1536-11e7-80f4-13e067d5072c\)](https://www.ft.com/content/3eac5a0e-1536-11e7-80f4-13e067d5072c) than £7.50 an hour.

Social care is also the sector where the worst employment practices tend to be found. Andy Burnham, the mayor for Greater Manchester in England, read out the time sheet of an unnamed care worker earlier this year. Forty-eight visits were crammed in to a 17-hour shift — the shortest lasting two minutes. There is not much care, let alone empathy or conversation, that you can fit into two minutes with half an eye on the clock. After a midnight finish, the work started again just after 3am.

If these are the fastest-growing jobs in the economy and some of the [uniquely human jobs \(https://www.ft.com/content/4523e9a4-f472-11e6-95ee-f14e55513608\)](https://www.ft.com/content/4523e9a4-f472-11e6-95ee-f14e55513608) of the future, we need to make them better. We could stop calling the people who do them unskilled, for a start. But the real challenge for policymakers and employers is how to persuade taxpayers or clients to pay more for them.

For politicians fretting about the future of work, this needs to be their first priority, not the latest [explosive study \(https://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/nov/12/robots-threat-en-low-paid-jobs-says-bank-of-england-chief-economist\)](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/nov/12/robots-threat-en-low-paid-jobs-says-bank-of-england-chief-economist) about how many jobs may-or-may-not be automated 20 years from now. We should worry less about the jobs that might be going, and more about the jobs we know are staying.

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