[Managing the Future of Work Course Overview – Spring 2021](#)

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The nature and scope of work is changing rapidly, creating massive business challenges in the shadow of broader political and social shifts. HBS launched a major initiative in 2017 on *Managing the Future of Work* to define these workplace issues and highlight their implications for business leaders. The *Managing the Future of Work* course reflects some of the learnings from this initiative and will cover the following main themes:

- Automation and its impact on jobs and different segments of the workforce
- Mismatch between skill demand and supply, including demographic factors and geographic differences across places
- Evolving labor models, including the gig economy and remote work in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic
- Actions steps around training, policy, and entrepreneurship.

The course allows students to examine different perspectives around the future of work, taking on the lens of business, policy, and workforce development institutions in advanced economies. The material gives a modest edge to implications for business leadership in corporations (i.e., what opportunities might be available for firms like Apple or Unilever, and what should they do?) and emerging business concepts and applications in start-up companies.

Embedded in the approach is the assumption that tackling these complex workplace issues will require new competencies for executives, including the ability to collaborate with and understand the needs of labor stakeholders, policy leaders, and educators. Part of becoming a leader versed in future of work issues is the ability to understand tradeoffs, and fully contextualizing the costs, benefits, and spillover implications of decisions or policies requires familiarity with data. A key component of the will center around data fluency in debates and projects where original data analysis is used to inform conclusions.

This course is a great fit for students who want to position themselves for careers in the future of work landscape. These roles could be as a startup founder for a company related to the future of work, as a business executive guiding a larger firm through its required transformation, as a leader within policy and labor groups interacting with firms, or as a learning and development leader playing an important role in training and reskilling.

The class is taught by Christopher Stanton. Class sessions include case studies, primers that layout the core issues on topics, and playbook reports designed for business and policy leaders. We also mix in multi-media content (podcasts, videos, etc.) where best suited. Class guests are frequent.

Course grades are based on class participation (40%), exercises and presentations of analysis (35%), an individual writeup reflecting on group exercise 2 (15%), and short-answer responses to pre-class questions (10%).

Content and Structure

Module 1: Future of Work Drivers and Scenarios. The course begins by tackling the question: What is the future of work?   There is much prognostication on this question, with widely varying focuses. Issues range from the pace of technological change to demographic timebombs to the fissuring of traditional employment relationships. The beginning of the Module 1 focuses primarily on technological change to build frameworks for understanding the different paths for technical advancement. A core question is what will be the impact of AI and robotics on jobs, and when? We will concentrate on which features are required for emerging technologies to affect occupations as they currently exist, i.e. when will autonomous driving become competitive with human drivers or when will robotic arms have the dexterity to do many non-standardized manual tasks? With an understanding of requirements, we evaluate different scenarios for the arrival of new technology, while ultimately forecasting what jobs will be more or less affected if technology evolves in different directions.

Module 1 also features sessions on demographics and regional differences across places. Demographic challenges are often associated with the age structure of a population and the simultaneous care needs for the young and old. Japan is the most prominent example, in part due to dwindling fertility and also because immigration has historically been limited. We also consider a hot topic domestically: regional differences across the United States and the urban-rural divide. Historical perspective on the location of economic activity will allow an informed discussion of the future of cities due to remote work and its escalation during the pandemic.

Exercise 1: The discussion of geographic differences across places will dovetail with our first exercise on good jobs and their location. We will use data from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) to understand the geographic distribution of occupations and industries across the United States. The ACS is the building-block to understand a wide variety of issues around infrastructure, neighborhoods, jobs, demographics, and the workforce. This early exercise will build familiarity with the ACS data and will expose students to the richness of the micro-data. The exercise dovetails with emerging policy papers that seek to understand the definition of good jobs, living wages, and affordability crises in cities.

Module 2: New Labor Models for the Future of Work. The second module evaluates how the labor models used by firms and workers is changing because of these technology and demographic drivers. We consider the development and future of the gig/contractor economy, businesses' responsibility toward employees, and regulatory issues around employee classification. The second module presents the perspectives of firms managing the choice between contractors and W2 employees and tensions from this difference, platforms trying to sell flexible work solutions to enterprises, and enterprises' adoption decisions of different work arrangements.

In the background of this discussion is implications for worker welfare. David Weil, head of the Wage and Hours Division of the Department of Labor in the Obama Administration, frames these trends as the fissuring of the workplace, and worries that traditional benefits and protections are disappearing. Others point to workers' preferences for flexibility as a driver of new work arrangements, and present a much more positive view. We will tackle questions about the evolution of gig economy work arrangements, where we would expect these arrangements to gain share, and what the implications and responsibilities will be for managers. Module 2a concludes with potential new workplace arrangements addressing increasing care responsibilities borne by employees (young children, aging/elderly parents, etc.), fair chance employment practices, and the ways that companies are boosting their talent supply chain.

Module 3: New Policy and Education Models for Future of Work. The second module continues with a perspective that extends beyond the individual firm to consider potential policy and education sector models for the future of work. We consider national policies like Universal Basic Income and regional interventions that enhance local capacities. We also consider apprenticeship models, competency-based education, and related education/reskilling innovations seeking to build "durable" skills and career pathways for workers.

Exercise 2: Our second exercise explores topics of students' choice, either from a business or a policy perspective, subject to the exercise involving a data-driven or analytical component. Professor Stanton has sourced several possible projects for students who don't have their own ideas. The exercise will involve work in groups of 3-4 with plenty of consultation with Professor Stanton and several class days dedicated to getting feedback.

Taking Action: Our class wraps up with exploring how you can take action now for managing the future of work.