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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

The *Istishraf* Journal for Future Studies

A special issue on “The Future of Work in the Arab Countries”

Call for papers



While past conversations about the future of work have been closely linked to artificial intelligence and automation, with concerns that robots would replace large segments of workers and employees, recent discussions about prospects for employment have been derailed by the shock emergence of the (Covid-19) pandemic.

Multiple overlapping elements that determine these prospects have been highlighted as the result of complex economic, technological, demographic, social, health and environmental dynamics, all of which contribute to building a prediction about the likely trajectory of employment. Accordingly, for Arab countries to prepare for the future reality of work, these factors need to be evaluated, especially through the development of economic and political actors from now on appropriate visions and strategies.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Future Shifts in Employment Patterns

While the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed workplaces and widely encouraged the trend towards remote work, the movement towards structural change in the workplace has long been underway. More specifically, the pandemic has contributed to the advancement of three pre-existing trends in the future of work. The first is the continuation of hybrid remote work; The pandemic has shown that 20-25% of workers in advanced economies, and about 10% in emerging economies, can fully or intermittently work remotely (from two to five days a week), especially in office paces where work is mostly undertaken on a computer.¹ This percentage is estimated at four to five times the level it was before the pandemic. The advances in virtual reality, augmented reality, mixed reality, and robotics are reducing the need for people to share physical space or being in the workplace, as well as reducing the demand for mass commuting restaurants, and congestion in urban centres.

The second trend that the pandemic has accelerated is the continued growth in the share of e-commerce and the “delivery economy”, which in 2020 became two to five times faster than it had been before the pandemic, and led to the creation of jobs that helped compensate for losses in other professions. This trend is also accelerating the decline of low-paid jobs in traditional retail outlets and restaurants, while increasing the dynamics of distribution and delivery centres. The rapid transition to e-commerce and other virtual interactions is likely to continue due to their convenience and efficiency. One example is the now widespread reliance on telemedicine consultations.

The third trend is the accelerated development of and reliance on automation and artificial intelligence under the demands of the pandemic, which is set to continue at the same pace in the coming years, with more and more robots used in factories and warehouses, the proliferation of customer self-service kiosks, and service robots acquired to deal with customers, etc. Many companies have halted

¹ In this regard, Facebook decided, to name a few, that all employees who can perform their work remotely have the possibility to choose to work remotely on a permanent basis; Note that those who will change their areas will have their salaries adjusted according to the cost of living in their new areas. See: Tsedal Neeley, *Remote Work Revolution: Succeeding from Anywhere* (New York: Harper Business, 2021).



unnecessary investments to focus on developing critical digital tools and platforms to enable remote work and reach customers, to better deal with the sharp increases in demand caused by the pandemic, to reduce congestion in crowded places, and to provide customers with touch-free service experiences, for example, through self-service in stores, ordering on apps, or via QR codes in restaurants.

Future Employment Trends

The most prominent international organizations (OECD,² ILO,³ and World Economic Forum⁴, as well as leading consulting firms (Deloitte,⁵ McKinsey,⁶ Bain,⁷ BCG⁸, and other organizations, bodies and researchers have published books, articles and reports on the subject, highlighting their expectations regarding the motives that affect the future of work and its trends.⁹

These works highlight that workplace transformations in the present and the near future fall within a broader framework represented by the fourth industrial revolution, which has changed practices, habits, relationships and aspirations, in the present, with more changes to come. Advances in artificial intelligence, the internet of things, cloud computing, big data, virtual reality, augmented reality, blockchain, robotics, and automation are present in all aspects of our lives, and their pace will increase even more in the future.¹⁰ Work as a “spacetime” that dominates a large part of our existence is one of the most important aspects of life. Therefore, it will be strongly affected in the nature of professions and the means of their production, as well as in the methods of work, and in our relationship with it. The nature of innovation, as the basic foundation upon which the knowledge economy is based, will change in the future with the impact of the digital and technological revolution.¹¹ Accordingly, companies and production establishments change dramatically.¹² This is in addition to the fact that the organization of work teams will increasingly move towards “virtual

2 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, “The Future of Work,” accessed on 14/6/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3r0CXZQ>.

3 International Labour Organization, “The Future of Work,” accessed on 14/6/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3nVPkEB>.

4 World Economic Forum, “Preparing for the Future of Work,” accessed on 14/6/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3qVYuTm>.

5 “Future of Work,” Deloitte, accessed on 14/6/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3qWKZTg>.

6 “Future of Work,” McKinsey & Company, accessed on 14/6/2021, at: <https://mck.co/3KFCh3G>.

7 Karen Harris, Austin Kimson & Andrew Schwedel, *Labor 2030: The Collision of Demographics, Automation and Inequality, Report*, Bain & Company, 7/2/2018, accessed on 14/6/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3H4f5tK>.

8 Boston Consulting Group (BCG), “The Future of Work,” accessed on 14/6/2021, at: <https://on.bcg.com/3nRe80n>

9 Cf. Michel Servoz, *The Future of Work? Work of the Future! On How Artificial Intelligence, Robotics and Automation are Transforming Jobs and the Economy in Europe* (Bruxelles: European Commission, 2019); International Register of Certificated Auditors, *The Future of Work: A CQI Quality Futures Report* (London: Chartered Quality Institute, 2020); Manpreet Randhawa, “Five Dimensions Shaping the Future of Work,” myHRfuture Academy, 18/6/2019, accessed on 21/12/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3fxF8Ma>.

10 See: The Editorial Board, “The Future of Arab Science and Technology in the Fourth Industrial Revolution,” in: *Istishraf6*, “Foreseeing the Transformations of Science and Technology: The Arab Gateway to the Future,” (Doha/Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2021); Jon-Arild Johannessen, *The Workplace of the Future: The Fourth Industrial Revolution, the Precariat and the Death of Hierarchies* (London/ New York: Routledge, 2019).

11 Cf. Hans Schaffers, Matti Vartiainen & Jacques Bus (eds.), *Digital Innovation and the Future of Work* (Gistrup, Denmark: River Publishers, 2020).

12 Cf. Arvind K. Birdie (ed.), *The Future of Organizations: Workplace Issues and Practices* (Oakville, ON: Apple Academic Press, 2019).



communities,” based on digital networking.¹³ Automation and robotics will be more included, not only in all production processes, but also in services.¹⁴

Other trends in the future of work related to the challenges of education, especially higher education, vocational training, skill development throughout employment, and flexibility in career change, all of which are of great importance in the context of this rapid and continuous change.¹⁵ What educational and training public policies will be effective in adapting to the future needs of labour markets? What technical and personal skills will people need in the future to be able to compete for jobs?

Reconfigured labour markets reveal new occupations and jobs, new forms of work and the status of workers.¹⁶ Professional aspirations for more flexibility, independence, freedom, experience and meaning have evolved. New working styles include new ways of expressing oneself and experiencing daily professional life, both in terms of working hours and environments. How will tomorrow’s work methods take shape? Will hours spent working decrease? Will the models of self-entrepreneurship, freelancing, and temporary management be widely adopted in the future? What will tomorrow’s offices look like? Will we work in open or co-working spaces, or will telecommunication and hybrid work become the norm?

Notable changes will also be observed in employment policies and methods. Will the trends that started now, for example, social networks and broadcasting platforms, continue to be a major source for vetting and selecting candidates? Will video CVs be circulated to allow employers to analyse the non-verbal communication of job applicants? Will initial interviews be conducted remotely before meeting shortlisted candidates in person? Will recruiters pay less attention to resumes and cover letters in favour of candidate personalities and soft skills?

These structural changes to labour markets in the future will necessarily be reflected in salary and leave policies, and social systems that will undergo significant changes. Could real wages be higher for low-skilled workers whose skills cannot be automated compared to peers whose skills can be replaced by robots? Is the gender pay gap closing? Will annual leave allowances be affected in the future, especially with the reduction of the work week and the increased frequency of periodic vacations? How will these changes be reflected in social support systems, such as pensions and private health care benefits?

Finally, it is certain that questions of employment equity and participation will intensify in the future,¹⁷ whether in relation to the massive wage disparities between men and women, or to the

13 Cf. Catalina Dumitru, *Building Virtual Teams: Trust, Culture, and Remote Working* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

14 Cf. Peter Matthews & Steven Greenspan, *Automation and Collaborative Robotics: A Guide to the Future of Work* (New York: Apress, 2020); Malcolm Frank, Paul Roehrig & Ben Pring, *What to do when Machines do Everything: How to get a Head in a World of AI, Algorithms, Bots, and Bigdata* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017).

15 Cf. Heather E. McGowan & Chris Shipley, *Let Go, Learn Fast, and Thrive in the Future of Work: The Adaptation Advantage* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2020); Hee Soo Yin & Renee Tan (eds.), *Future of Work: Future of Learning*, Adult Learning Symposium 2016 (Singapore: Institute for Adult Learning, 2017).

16 Cf. Nahia Orduña, *Your Digital Reinvention: A Practical Guide for Discovering New Job Opportunities and Finding your Place in the Future of Work* (Seattle, WA: Amazon Digital Services, 2020); Richard Susskind & Daniel Susskind, *The Future of The Professions: How Technology will transform the Work of Human Experts* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015).

17 Cf. Thomas Diefenbach, *The Democratic Organisation: Democracy and the Future of Work* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2020); Ralph Fevre, *Individualism and Inequality: The Future of Work and Politics* (Cheltenham, UK/ Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2016).



increasing polarization of wages. Are we witnessing the democratization of corporate ownership, and an increase in employee stock in the future?

These are some of the most important trends that will determine the future of work in the foreseeable future and in the long-term, and which should be considered from a forward-looking perspective, especially by linking them to specific Arab contexts.

Arab Work Trajectories

Arab countries face many labour market challenges, which are set to worsen in the near future due to the steady demographic increase in these countries and the continued open “demographic window,”¹⁸ starting with the challenge of unemployment, the inconsistency of the outputs of the education and vocational training systems and market needs, low productivity, weak production structures, and other structural challenges.

The question of economic diversification is pressing in many Arab countries, especially those with economies largely dependent on the hydrocarbon sector, and will become more acute in the future as reserves decline.¹⁹ This in turn raises the question of the quality of skills required in the future in countries whose national future visions target fundamental qualitative shifts in their development model based on a large government role in generating jobs and oil revenues on the one hand, and on importing goods, services and employment on the other. They will need to move towards a new model in which the private sector generates job opportunities for the increasing citizenry, based on local production and export to maximize the technological component and local added value. What skills and change in prevailing mentalities will this require?

In addition, the digital divide, and behind it the great knowledge divide, represents one of the most important challenges standing in the way of transitioning to a knowledge-based economy in Arab states. How can education and training systems be transformed to be consistent with the future knowledge and technological needs of Arab labour markets?

In this context, it is important to not neglect the gender dilemma in Arab labour markets, and its great economic and social impacts. This also requires effective public policies and important shifts in mentalities and cultures, in order to accommodate for all members of society in labour markets, on the basis of efficiency and equity at the same time.

The question of environmental sustainability is a further major challenge, due to the severity of climate change and its wide-ranging impact. This opens new horizons for production and consumption patterns, and thus many “green” jobs, which should be cultivated from now.

¹⁸ See: *Istishraf* 5, “The Futures and Repercussions of Demographic Transformations in the Arab World” (Doha / Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2020).

¹⁹ See, for example: Khalid bin Rashid Al-Khater, “Forecasting Prospects for Economic Diversification and Sustainability in the Gulf Economies, in Light of the Collapse in Oil Prices”, in: *Istishraf* 3 “Forecasting the Future of Energy,” (Doha / Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2018) pp. 52 - 72.



So how can consistent, competitive and smart Arab labour markets that contribute to promoting growth and prosperity, ensuring peace and stability in Arab societies, and keeping them away from conflicts and violence be built? What public policies promoting job production are consistent with current and future transformations and how can the skills of blue-collar and white-collar workers be developed appropriately? How can women’s equality in the workplace in a region marked by structural gender inequality be pursued? And how will Arab countries face the challenges that result from the growing rate of guest workers?

In conclusion, forecasting transformations in work raises many complex questions, first for job providers, secondly for the employees themselves who are faced with the need to adapt to the needs of future labour markets, and thirdly, for policy makers in charge of strategic choices for how to organize the future of work. In the absence of forward-looking visions and proactive efforts, the current problems in Arab countries are likely to be exacerbated rather than prevented.

If the future of work can be accurately predicted, a map of actions, trends, and motives can be drawn for the present. Hence, the importance of this special issue of *Istishraf*, which takes a forward-looking perspective to explore the various issues related to work transformations, to analyse their layered significance for the future of the Arab countries, and chart their prospects, especially according to the following main themes:

- Receptors for remote and hybrid work.
- Projected impact of automation and artificial intelligence on labour markets.
- Arab Labour Markets: Future Opportunities and Challenges.
- Arab labour markets and the challenges of economic diversification, environmental sustainability, and social equity.
- The future of higher education, vocational training and job opportunities.
- Structural transformations of labour markets.
- Gender inequalities and the role of women in Arab labour markets.
- Future policies on salaries, social systems and retirement.

Publication Guidelines

Istishraf welcomes research proposals “The Future of Work in Arab Countries,” which are characterized by original research and which address gaps in the current literature, according to ACRPS guidelines. The completed research is subject to peer-review before publication.

- The research paper should range between a 6000 and 8000 wordcount



- Research will be published in Arabic. Papers can also be submitted in English to be translated after approval.
- Research proposals will be received up until 30 June 2022.
- Proposals should be sent to: istishraf@dohainstitute.org

Note: *Istishraf* is also accepting critical reviews of newly published books related to the same topic, with a 3000 - 4500 wordcount.