

Opinion | Betsey Stevenson, Columnist

A Lot of ‘Unskilled’ Workers Actually Aren’t

The rise of AI and America’s transition to a service economy require us to rethink our views about what kinds of jobs matter.

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By **Betsey Stevenson**

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Your wage doesn't determine your worth. *Photographer: Mark Makela/Getty Images North America*

Labor Day is an appropriate moment to consider the term “unskilled.” Economists have used it for as long as I can remember, and at some point, I became numb to it, thinking it was just a neutral classification. But it’s not

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No matter how valuable your skills are in the market today, they may or may not be highly valued by the market over the course of your lifetime. With AI threatening to devalue entire categories of human work, we need to be more purposeful in recognizing a distinction: The market value of a set of skills is not the same as its human value. A person's worth is never determined by their potential market wage.

The challenge for anyone trying to ensure that society has plenty of jobs that pay a reliable living wage is that any training program for people can also be used to train artificial intelligence. If you can think of a specific skill and write down the bullet points of knowledge needed to develop it, an AI program can likely do that, too. Not only can AI pass many college-level courses, it can also pass the bar exam.

So what is left for humans to do? We must invest in our humanity. At its core, a job has always been about meeting the needs of others. When we were an ~~agrarian society, many jobs centered on meeting the basic need for food. As~~

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of them in education and health services.

This isn't a new direction coming out of Covid. It's the return of the US labor market to pre-pandemic trends. Job growth was strong from 2015 to the start of the pandemic, and in this century, the US manufacturing sector has shrunk while the service sector has exploded, more than compensating for job losses elsewhere.

The reality is that the US has become a service economy. Americans still have basic needs, but they are oriented less toward stuff and more toward services. In this context, it's necessary to rethink assumptions about what kinds of jobs matter and, more important, how different kinds of work are valued.

Many people still don't recognize caregiving, for example – whether for the very young or very old – as a particularly skilled profession. This is mistaken. Anyone who has ever had a teacher who changed the course of their life simply by listening knows that some people develop skills that are extremely valuable and hard to acquire. How do you listen to someone's needs even when they're not clearly articulated? How do you help children develop confidence and joy? How do you help people find calm in a chaotic world?

As we enter an era in which the value of “hard skills” may be diminishing due to automation, the value of “soft skills” – such as empathy and communication – will rise. The future of work may lie not in competing with

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remember that our worth is not determined by a paycheck, an algorithm or a label. It is defined by our shared humanity, our ability to contribute in meaningful ways, and our capacity to care for and connect with each other in a world that is constantly changing.

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