

## Inquiries into the future of work

**Supervisors:** Dr Jamie Woodcock and [Dr Owain Smolović Jones](#), Department for People and Organisations, The Open University Business School

### Project description:

There has been much recent discussion on the future of work, both within and beyond academia. For some sides of the argument, automation is set to displace the majority of workers (Frey and Osborne, 2017), new digital technologies like platforms are reshaping the economy (Srnicsek, 2017), or that the work itself has fundamentally changed. However, many of the debates on the future of work pay little attention to the experiences of workers – for example, discussing the “future of work”, rather than future of/for workers. While technological innovation, new management techniques, new organisational forms, and a range of other factors are clearly important to understand, the experience of workers remains a key – and under-researched – part of this debate.

It is through understanding the changes that are happening in work at the present time that we can better understand what possible futures of work there are. This involves examining the composition of work at different points in the economy: understanding how workers experience the technical organisation of their work, including the labour process, management, and use of technology; the organisation of workers in society, with oppression, patterns of migration, access to housing, and so on; and the forms of resistance and political organisation that workers develop.

We are therefore interested in proposals that engage with the debates on the future of work through empirical research with workers. We consider these inquiries as potentially broad in scope, method, and methodology, but expect proposals that explore workers’ experiences. These could focus on how workers:

- build solidarity and collective forms of non-hierarchical leadership;
- collectively learn, generate and deploy knowledge;
- draw on aesthetic and affective resources and methods to engage others in ethically and politically salient ways;
- develop intersectional experiences of organising
- use new forms of digital technology to organise and subvert exploitative working conditions.

Methodologically, successful applicants will pursue (auto)ethnography, interviews, visual or other qualitative methods, and we are particularly looking for proposals that experiment with approaches to co-create research findings with workers (see, for example, Woodcock, 2017; Waters and Woodcock, 2017; Cant, 2019). Possible research sites could include both new and traditional forms of work, for example platform work, the care sector, logistics or other under-researched areas.

A desirable applicant will have some experience of precarious, zero-hours and gig economy work and/or some direct knowledge and contacts within such a context, through a trade union, more directly or both. However, the supervision team will be able to assist a successful applicant with research access.

The successful applicant will be based within the innovative Research into Employment, Empowerment and Futures group (REEF) within the Department for People and Organisations. The focus of the group is

upon better understanding the possibilities for emancipatory future work, in particular issues of identity, leadership, power, trade union organising and learning.

**References:**

Cant, C. (2019) *Riding for Deliveroo: Resistance in the New Economy*. Cambridge: Polity.

Frey, C.B. and Osborne, M.A. (2017) The future of employment: How susceptible are jobs to computerisation? *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 114: 254–80.

Srnicek, N. (2017) *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity.

Waters, F. and Woodcock, J. (2017) Far from seamless: A workers' inquiry at Deliveroo. *Viewpoint Magazine*, 20 September. Available at: <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/09/20/far-seamless-workersinquiry-deliveroo/>

Woodcock, J. (2017) *Working the Phones: Control and Resistance in Call Centres*. London: Pluto.