

The future of work: embracing uncertainty in policy-making

Academics, policy advisors, and policy-makers have fuelled rich discussions over the last few years about how the future of work might look like and how it can be shaped. At this moment, most publications highlight the impact that technological developments in robotics and artificial intelligence have on the labour market (Dachs, 2017). However, uncertainty about what to expect from these developments remains, and experts regularly fall prey to either optimistic or pessimistic visions for the future of work (Balliester & Elsheikhi, 2018). In optimistic interpretations we see visions such as that of Leadbeater (2000), in which we move into a world of rewardingly co-operative, creative, and socially useful work. On the pessimistic front, Rifkin (1995) envisioned worldwide technological unemployment and the breakdown of social order, and Beck (2000) wrote about a world of growing insecurity and risk. In this debate experts often disagree not only about how emerging technologies will affect the labour market in the next years and decades, but also about the possible policy solutions. The uncertainty about the nature and significance of the problem and its resolution make it very difficult for policy-makers to prepare the labour market for the future. At the same time, policy-makers are expected to seize the opportunities and meet the challenges of the future labour market before it is too late.

By looking at this situation as an instance of policy-making in the context of uncertainty, this paper aims to study how policy-makers prepare the labour market for an unknown future. Traditionally policy-makers dealt with uncertainty by ignoring it and implicitly assuming that the future world will be structurally more or less the same as the current world (Walker & Marchau, 2003). However, ignoring uncertainty can result in policy failures and could mean that we limit our ability to take corrective action in the future (Walker, Marchau & Swanson, 2010). Therefore, policy-makers have to design labour market policies that take into account uncertain future developments (Poli, 2017). Broadly speaking, although there are differences in definitions, and ambiguities in meanings, the literature offers four different approaches for dealing with uncertainty in making policy (Van Der Steen, 2016). These are: robustness, resilience, agility, and antifragility. A robust policy is able to remain in a desired state over a range (magnitude and duration) of stress. In contrast resilience is the ability of a policy to ‘bounce back’ to a desired state after experiencing stress (Johnson & Gheorghe, 2013). An agile policy is able to quickly and effectively react to stress (Capano & Woo, 2017). To create advantages out of stress is the idea of an antifragile policy (Taleb, 2012). This paper compares these concepts by reviewing their policy goals, policy means and temporal implications, and presents several real world examples of robust, resilient, agile, and antifragile labour market policies. The comparison not only improves understanding of these concepts, it also reveals that they differ in their potential value for policy-making for the future of work.

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