

Education, population, poverty, tax...getting views on topics like those in Jersey isn't the difficult part – but have you ever noticed how many people sound eminently credible when talking about them, even though they may actually be basing their views on conjecture, false facts and blind guesswork?

There is a real danger in making the 'facts' fit the opinion, rather than the other way around – which is exactly the point at which someone with an eye on the latest buzzwords will smugly insert the phrase 'post-truth' into the conversation, imagining its actually helpful.

So, we've asked the Jersey Policy Forum to add some robust material to those crucial local debates – the point is not to provoke agreement or acquiescence; it is to provide reliable material on which others can build their views.



Gailina Liew, Director, Jersey Policy Forum

THINK-TANK

Youngstown, Ohio in the United States is an oft-cited example of what can happen when jobs disappear from a community on a large scale. Youngstown was a booming city with higher wages and home ownership levels than average but things started to change after World War II when demand softened and steel production was shifted to other parts in the world. On September 19, 1977 (now known as Black Monday) the steel mill closed its doors and 5,000 people were instantly unemployed. Within 5 years, 50,000 jobs were lost and there were sharp rises in spousal abuse, crime, suicide and the mental health caseload tripled.

What do you want to be when you grow up?

Do you remember hearing that question from your parents and teachers when you were a child? What did you say? Are you now doing what you thought you would be doing or did your path change direction along the way? Is this question even meaningful to ask of our children today?

Inherent in the question, "what do you want to be...?" is "how are you going to support yourself?" So, the question might be more pointedly reframed as: "what kind of work do you want to do when you have the responsibility to support yourself and your dependants?" If you're middle-aged like me, there are many jobs now that didn't even exist when we were children.

Some examples and related facts to ponder:

- According to Social Blade, there were more than 23 million YouTube channels (with at least 5 or more subscribers) in 2018;
- 96.5% of these will earn less than the US poverty threshold of USD12,140/year for a single person;

- Google always gets its 45% of the pie but individual earnings are difficult to estimate with precision due to a myriad of advertising/sponsorship models - a common rule of thumb used by aspiring YouTubers is an average of USD one dollar for every 1,000 views;
- in 2016, the top 3% of YouTubers got 9 out of every 10 views whereas the bottom 85% got a maximum of 458 views/month - the top 1 percent got 2.2 million to 42.1 million views/month;
- 1 in 3 British children age 6 to 17 told pollsters last year that they wanted to become a full-time YouTuber... that's three times as many as those who wanted to become a doctor or a nurse.
- There are currently 3 million Uber drivers worldwide (0.75 million in the US and 2.25 million in the rest of the world);
- average Uber driver income is USD364/month;
- US Uber drivers' median hourly rate can be as low as USD8.55;

- Rival Lyft and others such as Grab (Southeast Asia), Yandex (Russia) and Didi Chuxing (China) all claim to have millions of drivers as well.
- According to Statista, the number of active sellers on Etsy (online marketplace for vintage, artisanal and unique hand-crafted products) grew from 830,000 in 2012 to 2,115,000 in 2018 who generated a total of USD603.7 million in revenues.

It's pretty clear from the numbers that working as a YouTuber, Uber driver or Etsy artisan is not an easy path to supporting yourself, let alone to wealth (unless you happen to have invented one of these business concepts!). So, why are so many people doing it?

Let's consider the idea of 'a purposeful life'. The Japanese have a concept known as "Ikigai". It can be visualised as four overlapping dimensions that reflect an individual's unique aspirations, talents and employment opportunities with social purpose. The magic spot is where the four dimensions overlap:



Source: dreamstime | Image: Toronto Star Graphic

The information cited earlier in this article reflect what many describe as disruptive business models that have been enabled by recent technological advances in connectivity, the removal of capital-intensive and/or social network barriers to entry for individual contributors/participants, the rise of a sharing economy mindset and the ability to share creative and artisanal output beyond a local geography. As a group, the people who engage in working in these businesses are said to be part of the "gig economy". There are definitely challenges for the people who do the work and create the content and products as there are generally no social safety nets and labour laws to protect them. The average

earnings statistics might point to a world where people are constantly hustling and struggling to make ends meet but what if they are looked at in the light of striving to achieve Ikigai? Is it possible that so many people are drawn to these "gig" employment opportunities because, in part, it allows for a more purposeful life?

The data on why people work in the gig economy is disparate and incomplete. Even the overall size of the gig economy and how many people are engaged in it are unknowns. Anecdotally, people speak about being able to earn a little extra income while exploring their creative side, pursuing a passion, or finding the flexibility of working only when needed, convenient, useful and necessary when juggling family and caring responsibilities. Being able to support oneself entirely from this type of work is very difficult and people who manage to do this are often working more than the standard 37-40 hours/week that a more traditional job with a set salary and benefits would typically require. But traditional jobs are on the decline as new business models, thinking and automation continue to impact the workplace. What will the impact be on our societies and well-being?

"Youngstown's story is America's story, because it shows that when jobs go away, the cultural cohesion of a place is destroyed," says John Russo, a Professor of Labour Studies at Youngstown State University. "The cultural breakdown matters even more than the economic breakdown." How is the loss of jobs related to the cultural breakdown? Does it have something to do with losing one's sense of purpose or reason to get out of bed in the morning?

As routine human labour is increasingly replaced by automation to reduce costs and take advantage of the technological advances we are making, do we need to redefine what work means to ensure that we and our human societies can continue to thrive into the future? Is "work" alone the right goal or might we all benefit more from targeting something along the lines of Ikigai? Are the gig economy businesses beginning to tap into more purposeful activity for people? Can they work economically for the people who make them successful? What are the right measures for a healthy thriving human society? What is the right question to ask our children today as we look to the future?