Are jobs obsolete?

(CNN) -- The U.S. Postal Service appears to be the latest casualty in digital technology's slow but steady replacement of working humans. Unless an external source of funding comes in, the post office will have to scale back its operations drastically, or simply shut down altogether. That's 600,000 people who would be out of work, and another 480,000 pensioners facing an adjustment in terms.

We can blame a right wing attempting to undermine labor, or a left wing trying to preserve unions in the face of government and corporate cutbacks. But the real culprit -- at least in this case -- is e-mail. People are sending 22% fewer pieces of mail than they did four years ago, opting for electronic bill payment and other net-enabled means of communication over envelopes and stamps.

New technologies are wreaking havoc on employment figures -- from EZpasses ousting toll collectors to Google-controlled self-driving automobiles rendering taxicab drivers obsolete. Every new computer program is basically doing some task that a person used to do. But the computer usually does it faster, more accurately, for less money, and without any health insurance costs.

We like to believe that the appropriate response is to train humans for higher level work. Instead of collecting tolls, the trained worker will fix and program toll-collecting robots. But it never really works out that way, since not as many people are needed to make the robots as the robots replace.

And so the president goes on television telling us that the big issue of our time is jobs, jobs, jobs -- as if the reason to build high-speed rails and fix bridges is to put people back to work. But it seems to me there's something backwards in that logic. I find myself wondering if we may be accepting a premise that deserves to be questioned.

I am afraid to even ask this, but since when is unemployment really a problem? I understand we all want paychecks -- or at least money. We want food, shelter, clothing, and all the things that money buys us. But do we all really want jobs?

We're living in an economy where productivity is no longer the goal, employment is. That's because, on a very fundamental level, we have pretty much everything we need. America is productive enough that it could probably shelter, feed, educate, and even provide health care for its entire population with just a fraction of us actually working.

According to the [U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization](#), there is enough food produced to provide everyone in the world with 2,720 kilocalories per person per day. And that's even after America disposes of thousands of tons of crop and dairy just to keep market prices high. Meanwhile, American banks overloaded with foreclosed properties are [demolishing vacant dwellings](#) to get the empty houses off their books.

Our problem is not that we don't have enough stuff -- it's that we don't have enough ways for people to work and prove that they deserve this stuff.

Jobs, as such, are a relatively new concept. People may have always worked, but until the advent of the corporation in the early Renaissance, most people just worked for themselves. They made shoes, plucked chickens, or created value in some way for other people, who then traded or paid for those goods and services. By the late Middle Ages, most of Europe was thriving under this arrangement.

The only ones losing wealth were the aristocracy, who depended on their titles to extract money from those who worked. And so they invented the chartered monopoly. By law, small businesses in most major industries were shut down and people had to work for officially sanctioned corporations instead. From then on, for most of us, working came to mean getting a "job."

The Industrial Age was largely about making those jobs as menial and unskilled as possible. Technologies such as the assembly line were less important for making production faster than for making it cheaper, and laborers more replaceable. Now that we're in the digital age, we're using technology the same way: to increase efficiency, lay off more people, and increase corporate profits.

While this is certainly bad for workers and unions, I have to wonder just how truly bad is it for people. Isn't this what all this technology was for in the first place? The question we have to begin to ask ourselves is not how do we employ all the people who are rendered obsolete by technology, but how can we organize a society around something other than employment? Might the spirit of enterprise we currently associate with "career" be shifted to something entirely more collaborative, purposeful, and even meaningful?

Instead, we are attempting to use the logic of a scarce marketplace to negotiate things that are actually in abundance. What we lack is not employment, but a way of fairly distributing the bounty we have generated through our technologies, and a way of creating meaning in a world that has already produced far too much stuff.

The communist answer to this question was just to distribute everything evenly. But that sapped motivation and never quite worked as advertised. The opposite, libertarian answer (and the way we seem to be going right now) would be to let those who can't capitalize on the bounty simply suffer. Cut social services along with their jobs, and hope they fade into the distance.

But there might still be another possibility -- something we couldn't really imagine for ourselves until the digital era. As a pioneer of virtual reality, Jaron Lanier, recently pointed out, we no longer need to make stuff in order to make money. We can instead exchange information-based products.

We start by accepting that food and shelter are basic human rights. The work we do -- the value we create -- is for the rest of what we want: the stuff that makes life fun, meaningful, and purposeful.

This sort of work isn't so much employment as it is creative activity. Unlike Industrial Age employment, digital production can be done from the home, independently, and even in a peer-to-peer fashion without going through big corporations. We can make games for each other, write books, solve problems, educate and inspire one another -- all through bits instead of stuff. And we can pay one another using the same money we use to buy real stuff.

For the time being, as we contend with what appears to be a global economic slowdown by destroying food and demolishing homes, we might want to stop thinking about jobs as the main aspect of our lives that we want to save. They may be a means, but they are not the ends.

The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Douglas Rushkoff.