



The jobs of the future will still need humans: Cognizant's Ben Pring

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Cognizant's Ben Pring**

Intro: Welcome to OECD Podcasts, where policy meets people.

Kate Lancaster [00:00:35] Welcome to OECD Podcasts, where policy meets people. What do you do? It's a common question in casual conversation, one we've probably all asked or answered, many times. But when was the last time you were really surprised by the response – taken aback or intrigued by someone's job?

Probably not that often. But in a world where nearly half of all jobs risk being automated or having their tasks radically reshaped by technology, this all may be about to change. I'm Kate Lancaster, to learn more about the jobs of the future, I'm speaking today with Ben Pring, co-founder and leader of Cognizant Center for the Future of Work and author of *What To Do When Machines Do Everything*. Welcome, Ben, and thank you for being with us.

Ben Pring [00:01:20] Great to be here, Kate. Thank you.

Kate Lancaster [00:01:22] Well, let's jump right in. Last year, Cognizant released a report *21 Jobs for the Future*. And this year, you're back with *21 More Jobs for the Future*.

So what I want to know is how did you choose them? Are these jobs you imagined, dreamed up, or ones you identified out there in the wild, so to speak?

Ben Pring [00:01:42] Yeah, a combination of all of the above, really. We sort of look at all the big trends in the marketplace, we study what's going on with technology, what's going on in politics, demographical issues, cultural issues – put them all into a big stew, try to look at them from every angle, try and think about which ones have legs, which ones are going to be with us for a while, which ones are, perhaps, passing phenomena – we've been doing this a long time – we kind of try and come up with things that we think are solid, things that are on the borderline between our imagination, a little bit of science fiction – but the reality of what's going on in the world today. So we started with a long list. We probably had about 200 ideas. And we whittled it down, and we sort of argue about it, and we drink a lot of coffee. And eventually we come up with these ones that we think are the ones we want to talk about.

Kate Lancaster [00:02:39] So how close are they to reality, then?

Ben Pring [00:02:42] Well, we try to structure the reports – both reports – on a timeline for the next 10 years. So some of them are very real now. Some of them probably not going to be real for 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 years' time. So I think that's the way to look at it. The future is always in the future, but the future is coming closer and closer.

Kate Lancaster [00:03:01] It's a horizon that's both advancing and approaching at the same time.

Ben Pring [00:03:04] That's right. Yes, exactly. So some of the jobs – one that's very top of mind at the moment – is in the cyber security world. Governments and big organisations have historically played defence in terms of their cyber security posture. We think that's changing now, and governments around the world are becoming much more aggressive and becoming more proactive in their stance towards cyber. And so one of the jobs of the future is a cyber attack agent.

Kate Lancaster [00:03:34] Is that someone who's making attacks or defending attacks?

Ben Pring [00:03:36] Yes, somebody who's making attacks. Historically, big countries like the UK, France, the US have basically been in defend mode. They're trying to repel cyber-attacks from outside. But because those things are so prevalent now and so pervasive, there's sort of been a zeitgeist change – a gestalt – where we're going on the front foot now rather than always playing defence.

Kate Lancaster [00:04:26] So this is a job that's near-term, possibly starting right now. But you did a report last year, you did a report this year – have you have any of last year's jobs already come true, so to speak?

Ben Pring [00:04:42] Yes, they have. It's funny. One of the jobs we wrote about last year was called a financial wellness coach. And it was this idea that we all kind of waste a lot of money between multiple bank accounts and credit cards and subscriptions that we have. Nobody really kind of thinks about that in a holistic way. What if you had a coach, a person, who had access to your kind of financial profile who could aggregate all of that data into a dashboard on a phone, on a laptop, but then help you think about well, you're wasting money here. – So there wasn't anything really like that when we started writing about it. But then MetLife in the US, one of the big financial institutions, they've instituted exactly that type of person – exactly that type of role. So yeah, the imagination is becoming real in front of our very eyes.

Kate Lancaster [00:05:43] the future is now.

Ben Pring [00:05:45] Yeah.

Kate Lancaster [00:05:46] So how future proof are these jobs at the same time? If technology is changing so rapidly and needs are changing so rapidly, how do we know that the jobs of the future aren't already becoming the jobs of the past?

Ben Pring [00:05:58] Well yeah, that's a very good question. I'm not somebody that ever says anything is future provable. Technology is changing so quickly – nothing is future provable now. And I think this is one of the realities in the modern world that we're going to have to deal with. But in the old model, you go to college, you get a degree in something, and basically then try and monetize that for 40 years – a career. That model's withering on the vine now. And I think we've got to accept as the new paradigm that we're going to do something for 10 years and then perhaps we have to do something else for 10 years. And it's this idea that, again, you go to college for four years at the beginning of your career – your adult life, if you like – what if we went to college for one year, then worked for 10 years. Then at 30, went for another year to refresh our skills or perhaps change course because technology's changed what you can do – again at 40, again at 50. [7m30] **Kate Lancaster** [] The jobs in the report are very tech-oriented – a lot of them – or certainly reflecting the way the world is changing. And yet we know that 6 out of 10 adults in OECD countries lack basic ITC skills or lack hands-on, everyday comfort with using a computer. They lack that kind of ITC experience

Ben Pring [00:08:42] It's going to be very, very hard to think of a job in the future that doesn't use technology in some way. So I think that behooves us, again, as parents, as educators, as leaders of different kinds of businesses and non-commercial organizations to continue to orientate people towards having some sort of digital literacy, some comfort level with this.

I think it's probably people who are maybe in their mid-40s through to their mid-30s who kind of use tech but not very much. They're the people we need to help a little bit more aggressively in terms of saying, look, you can get involved in this. You can go onto free online tools. Anybody can on the weekend or in the evening look at this stuff, begin to get onto that ladder.

Kate Lancaster [00:10:21] Yes. So it's a matter of both providing resources, whether it's, as you say, through online platforms or through an employer or through even public sector initiatives, but also encouraging a culture where it's normal to be a life-long learner.

Ben Pring [00:10:33] Yes, exactly. And I think that's happening naturally in a way sometimes that people perhaps higher up the ladder or older people don't see. There's a groundswell of that happening. Think about it in the creative industries. 20 years ago, 30 years ago if you wanted to make a record, a demo tape if you were a musician, you'd go into a recording studio. It would cost you \$5,000 – all your pocket money you'd saved up for years. You'd go into the recording studio, make a demo, and then try and get a record label to sign you up. Nowadays on Garageband on a phone, you've got all of that capability on your phone for free. And I think you can think about that happening in business, in other cultural aspects as well. Kids have got these incredible new tools – the means of production literally in their hands now

Kate Lancaster [00:11:40] In their pocket.

Ben Pring [00:11:42] In their pocket, yeah – literally in the palm of their hands. And I think there's going to be an explosion of creativity, an explosion of business opportunity around that. Again, it's going to look very different. The supply and demand side economics of that are very different from the traditional model that we've been comfortable with for the last 30, 40 years. But again, that's why I'm not so gloomy as some people are, because I think a lot of seeds are blooming all around the world if you're looking.

Kate Lancaster [00:12:07] What about soft skills? I'm an optimist as well, and I think there are many things that machines cannot do that we can, and soft skills is one of them.

Ben Pring [00:12:21] No, I completely agree with you. And that thought it's very much integrated into the reports that we've done, all the analysis that we've done. No arguably, the route to beating the robots is being a better human being. If the robots are going to do the automated all kind of routine, boring stuff, then it's going to be the human interaction, it's going to be the human interface. It's going to be humans wanting to work with other humans. And in fact, if you look – it sounds silly, but if you look at the leading edge of retail in America, in the UK, other parts of the world, there's this phenomenon called the un-store. And it's kind of inverting the notion that's happened in big retail, again, for the last generation or so where the big retailers are trying to make everything more efficient. They're trying to squeeze people out of the equation, have self-service, have these big kind of warehouses. But people go into the store to have a human experience and want to talk to a cool person who knows how to do this thing or can help me and inspire me to do this. And so that human interface is actually really, really important

Just as one example, you go into a big box retail store nowadays – certainly in America where I live – a, it's very hard to find anybody working on the floor. If you've got a question –

Kate Lancaster [00:15:10] This happens in France too.

Ben Pring [00:15:11] Yeah. So where's the toothpaste? There's nobody there to ask. And then when you do want to find somebody, it's some person who without being unpleasant about it, is not a very good human being.

Kate Lancaster [00:15:24] Perhaps we can say does not have the social skills for the job.

Ben Pring [00:15:26] That's right. Yeah. Yeah, well that's what I mean. I mean we want people who are good human beings in the sense of being able to be a part of the society that we want. And so I think that's very important. It may sound trivial to some people, but again, I think in an era of efficiency and of cutting costs, we sort of got ourselves in a downward cycle. And I think the way to get out of that cycle is to recognise that a lot of the opportunity in the future is going to be with the human being.

Kate Lancaster [00:15:54] That it's not just about technology replacing the person because it can, because it does the dangerous job or it does the heavy lifting, but that technology and human beings work together. Because if not, as you say, you end up with a soulless space.

Ben Pring [00:16:17] Yeah and I don't think anybody really wants that. And I think, again, if you look at the leading edge of technology development and you look at the leading practitioners of this, one example would be at Stanford in Silicon Valley in America. They've just set up a new facility there called the Center for Human-centered AI. And it's very much driven by people – the leading edge developers of this technology – who themselves are saying, look, time out. We've got to think about this in a more holistic, human-centered way. When people talk about the fourth Industrial Revolution, if you look at historically the industrial revolutions and then the coincidence of real revolution, there's a complete causal match. So I think in a way when people talk about the fourth Industrial Revolution and this need to bring people along and to keep things human-centered, what they're really saying is we want the first first Industrial Evolution.

Kate Lancaster [00:17:39] And that brings me to another question. There are ways in which technology has changed – how we find work, how we do work, how we develop work relationships. And for example, now we know in OECD countries, one in seven workers is self-employed. A growing number of these workers are in what we call the gray zone. So they may be independent contractors or gig workers, but they only have one main client. So in many respects, they are very similar to an employee but without the access to benefits, social protections that the traditional jobs used to have. So how do we grapple with this?

Ben Pring [00:18:50] It's a very big question. It's a very kind of mind-blowing question in a way. And of course, everything you point to is far worse in America than it is in Europe. The sort of European social net that doesn't exist in America makes the situation there even more precarious. I mean, there are, just as an aside, again, very intelligent, very well positioned people in academia and elsewhere who are thinking exactly about that – about, in essence, trying to create a new social contract for the social network age. I think that's work in progress – it's going to take a long time. Ultimately, the answer boils down to two things – legislation, regulation, so i.e. political control.

The other control mechanism that a society has to right itself if you like is the power of your purse. We individually all have the power of our purse. And so ultimately, I think if you feel uncomfortable with the Uber-style platform model, well, take a taxi. I was sitting outside a cafe yesterday afternoon here in Paris and the taxi drivers were all...

Kate Lancaster [00:21:52] Striking.

Ben Pring [00:21:53] Striking and honking their horns driving down the road. And that is literally the future of work being played out in front of consumers like us. And I don't know about you, but I took an Uber home. So it is a tough one, because I'm sympathetic to those taxi drivers. They're fighting for their future. But the Uber is easier for me. So it's a very, very complicated issue. And I think it will take generations to really play that out.

Kate Lancaster [00:22:22] And as you say, one where engagement happens on so many different levels – in the public policy sphere but also at the level of every individual person, each consumer.

Ben Pring [00:22:29] Yes. Every time you make a purchasing decision, you are expressing some form of your own response to all of these discussions. And unfortunately or not, the truth is we all know that it would be hypocritical of us to say, I don't want to spend less money. And we all do want to get things cheaper and cheaper, but in the macroeconomic sense, you know what ultimately that sort of does.

Kate Lancaster [00:22:58] Well, it's been fantastic talking to you. I could talk all afternoon. But before we say goodbye, I have one last question for you.

Ben Pring [00:23:05] Yeah.

Kate Lancaster [00:23:06] A question we've been asking many people over the past six months as part of our *I am the Future of Work* campaign at the OECD. And it's very simple – what is your hope for the future of work?

Ben Pring [00:23:17] My hope for the future of work is that we create better work. I think a lot of people have what I call a pre-nostalgia for work that's going away. And we know that a lot of the work that people do today is awful work, terrible work. If you're on a checkout counter, if you're doing tele-sales trying to sell cruise ships, if you're on a factory floor, if you're in a mine – a lot of that work is terrible, terrible work – soul-destroying work. There's an economist at the London School of Economics called David Graber, who if people haven't come across they should definitely look him up. He's a very interesting writer. He talks about bullshit jobs. That lots and lots of people – bourgeois, white collar, middle class people – do bullshit jobs. Those jobs could be automated away and give us the platform and the opportunity and the space to create better work. I think that's the great opportunity ahead of us.

That's what excites me is creating better work, spreading that round more broadly, allowing people to do more interesting, more creative, more fun, more engaging, more meaningful work. That's really, I think ultimately, the opportunity ahead of us.

Kate Lancaster [00:23:56] Ben, thank you very much. It's been a pleasure to talk to you. I'm Kate Lancaster, thank you for listening to OECD Podcasts. You'll find out much more about the issues we've been discussing today at [OECD.org](https://www.oecd.org) as well as at www.cognizant.com. To add your voice to the OECD Future of Work campaign go to [OECD/FOW](https://www.oecd.org/fow).

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