REVA
Seth
GUEST COLUMNIST

A conversation on the new world of work

Everything about how, when and where we work is currently undergoing a seismic shift. Disruptive technologies, automation, offshoring and the death of the lockstep corporate career are having a ripple effect across the lives of Canadians.

We can now expect to work longer hours, retire later and function without the certainty of a clear career path and the traditional benefits that came with an "office" job. A 2013 joint report from the United Way and McMaster University found that almost half the residents of southern Ontario are engaged in "precarious employment" or work in jobs that share some of the characteristics of precarious work. Across the border at the University of California, Berkeley, economist Robert Reich, a former labour secretary, predicts that by 2020 more than 40 percent of the US workforce will be made up of "contingent workers."

Yes, this change is primarily about how Canadians earn a living both today and in the years ahead. But it's also challenging all the frameworks we have collectively come to take for granted for how our professional and personal lives will unfold.

It's a shift that will impact home ownership, the decision to have children and retirement. But it's also about the element of chance in the daily structure of our lives and expectations. A stable office life provided community, support networks, knowledge upgrades, daily structure and purpose. Odds are that for many of us, the changes will be incredibly stressful and unnerving.

Over the next few months, I'll regularly be interviewing policy actors from many sectors about the following question: What ideas, changes, programs or

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suggestions do you have for helping the greatest number of Canadians to positively navigate these uncertain times?

To kick it off, I'm talking to Rana Sarkar, who is senior fellow at the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs, about his popular lecture "Whatever Happened to My So-Called Career?" Rana has been giving updated versions of this talk regularly over the past 15 years at the London School of Economics, the Cass Business School and, most recently, the Munk School.

I first met Rana when I started talking to him at a party about my own career questions. I married him seven dates later and have been discussing this topic (and my own issues) since then.

Seth: So, I'm starting with you, not just for ease of access, but because it was when I first heard the WHMSCC talk that I really became aware of just how narrow my understanding of how a successful career would or should happen really was. Where did the talk come from and how would you sum up the main ideas? What do you want people to take away from it?

Sarkar: It started as a way of providing context and hopefully some coping tools for the private anxieties we saw with students by unpacking the "career of the career" and looking at the "weirding of work," given tech and social change.

We looked at different frames for approaching work across time, digging into older notions of "vocation" and "livelihood" and how they are not the same. We also take on the idea of a linear career (which was useful in the industrial age but counterproductive today) and its powerful cultural overhang, which often stokes up a lot of fear and guilt of not getting "on track" or "measuring up," which holds people and organizations back from developing the skills to be successful today.

There is a dissonance between the existence of the social (and often parental!) expectation that one mitigate risk by burrowing into something "safe" like a bureaucratic job, and the fact this job might in the end be risky, given the changed world people are coping with.

We also saw in London between the 1990s recession and the first dot-com, our students were torn between trying to break into bureaucracies or global institutions, which were hiring shy, and what they saw around the corner in nimble start-ups, creative businesses and NGOs, which all worked in very different and often more appealing tech and flex-enabled ways.

The big take-away was you are not alone. This change is structural and not personal, and if you understand the new rules, build flexible skills and attitudes, manage "new" risks and expectations (and your parents'!), the new world of work can also be exciting. Giving yourself permission to experiment and iterate is key. There are also lessons for firms and government — to become more nimble and not just push the burden onto individuals during this economy-wide transition.

Seth: In terms of the current discussion on income inequality, the shrinking middle class and the rise of precarious employment, what is the best career advice you would give someone struggling to navigate this landscape?

Sarkar: The middle is no longer safe. A product of economic transition is polarity. It's going to take time for policy or employers to adjust, so you can't expect much from them in the short term.

In the meantime individuals, particularly those at risk of being shunted to the bottom, should get informed on what's changing (the new rules of work) and what's next.

You should develop your own risk mitigation tools, including financial literacy (your job and your livelihood need not be the same thing); building a tribe of supporters; mentors; and of, course, the relevant market skills: managing networks and learning how to learn more efficiently.

Be wary of over-relying on the advice of those well-meaning folks ahead of you, because the terrain has shifted. The traditional middle classes are learning what precarious workers have always known: having multiple oars in the water isn't a sign of being indecisive but a form of insurance and learning. They say, "Don't let your schooling get in the way of your education, but also, don't let your day job get in the way of your career."

Seth: And what is the best policy nudge to help them? And why?

Sarkar: Too much of our frame of public policy implicitly assumes a world of "standard" employment, much the same way neoclassical economists assume "rational" behaviour: paycheque-based incentives, while many people don't get regular paycheque. We need to think beyond the firm and move to incentives based on real behaviour. One aspect of policy needs to help workers (outside or inside the firm) manage their time and budget in more predictable ways. This means better line, of sight into hours (for child-care planning, for example) and schedules (for instance, to allow for holidays for temp workers). We also need to restart the conversation around a simplified income floor or guaranteed annual income.

Seth: A critique of the current set-up is that the people exploring policy solutions or programs are the tenured professors or full-benefit senior bureaucrats, the last bastion of people sheltered from this economic shift. Do you think that's fair or true? And if so, what would you say to them?

Sarkar: That's likely true — it's often difficult to feel how fast other parts of the economy are moving (despite reading a lot), but I expect it's almost impossible to be completely sheltered, as people learn a lot from their children and other family experiences. Part of this story is also generational. I don't think there are too many people under 35, even in government towns, whose friends aren't on the front line of this economic shift.

Seth: Based on where you see the trends shaping the future of work, what are you going to encourage your three boys to grow up and be?

Sarkar: Try many things in parallel, don't treat your job as your financial plan, and learn how to learn. Grow friendships, be helpful and take on causes bigger than you. Use the transition to think big and think global. ■