

SECTION 2 – WRITING TASK**Specific Instructions for Section 2**

Carefully read the following material ~~and then complete both parts.~~

Task Material**Work and Technology**

Towards the end of the last century, experts predicted that improved technology would free people from boring, monotonous tasks. Technological change seemed to promise a better lifestyle for all, with more time for activities outside work. However, far from delivering shorter working hours, technological advances have increased work time in many occupations. The manufacturing industry has eagerly adopted new technologies and more efficient procedures, computers have transformed the commercial world, and the traditional nine-to-five working day has been replaced by more flexible arrangements.

Recently, the Victorian Daily newspaper sponsored a forum in conjunction with various interest groups to examine the issues surrounding change in the workplace. These issues included the wider implications of short-term contracts, an increase in casual work and the growing popularity of job-sharing.

The following are extracts from speeches made at the forum:

Margaret Herschell – from Northern University’s Social Research Unit:

In the new millennium we are confronted by greater challenges than ever before in the way we see work. New technologies emerge at a breathtaking rate and governments are hell-bent on driving the economy to new heights, constantly encouraging business to adopt the most modern techniques. However, new technology can be a double-edged sword.

There is no question that the benefits of technology include improved work practices, production and distribution, not to mention a vast range of new products. The down side, revealed in recent studies, is the sometimes negative impact on workers who are affected by downsizing, outsourcing, and all other aspects of the ‘new’ workplace.

Worse still is the plight of those workers whose jobs have completely disappeared and who lack the skills required for the go-ahead world of today. Research has revealed an increase in stress, anxiety, and other work-related illnesses that impact adversely on workplaces and on families.

The desire for progress through technological change should not come at the expense of quality of life! We work hard for a high-tech lifestyle and income to buy products we’re told we can’t do without but which come at a price. Issues of equity, fairness and the time to enjoy the fruits of our labours are important. Don’t you think we deserve more from technology than a disrupted family life and dissatisfaction at work?

Clare Bianca – Trade Union official

The improvements to working conditions such as shorter working hours which have been promised again and again over the past twenty years have proved to be a complete 'con'. These improvements have simply not eventuated and today, at the start of a new era, too many workers are forced to work longer and longer hours while others remain on the unemployment scrapheap. Insecurity threatens just about everyone and I shudder to think what long-term effects this will have on individuals and society.

True, some monotonous production line jobs have been eliminated by technology, but others have been established in places such as call centres. Technology has not removed humdrum, repetitive, soul-destroying work – it's just produced more of it!

Employers don't seem to care about anything other than profit and so productivity and competition mean getting more out of workers in less time. The Trade Union movement supports innovation but not at the expense of ordinary workers. A more equitable system of balancing the welfare of workers and the needs of business must be found, particularly as the gap between them seems to be rapidly increasing.

Howard Brun – Business Council representative

Well, I hope I can introduce a note of reason into this discussion. A bit less emotion and a lot more analysis is what's needed at this point! The fact is that Australia needs to embrace technological change. Our future prosperity demands it! In communications alone, the I.T. revolution has brought us a whole raft of benefits: digital phones and TV, computer-controlled cars and appliances, and better industrial machinery. This is the 'big picture' of how we'd like to see Australia in the twenty-first century.

Union and employee concerns are understandable, but barriers can't be put in the way of progress. Ms Bianca trots out the same old tired rhetoric, negative thinking and confrontational attitudes we've come to expect from the unions. Business is not opposed to unions, so long as they abandon the restrictive practices of the past and look to the future in co-operation with employers.

We must continue with innovation and technological advances to improve productivity and make Australian industries more competitive in international markets. Being part of a global economy means abolishing outmoded practices and forging ahead into the future. All new technologies require adjustments, and we have no choice but to adapt to the current wave of changes, as great as they are.

The Victorian Daily ran a two-page spread on the forum and invited readers to comment. Here are extracts from letters to the editor:

High-tech elites

I am concerned about young people's ability to access jobs created by the new technologies. In recent years we've seen a reduction in university funding and resources stretched to the limit at all levels of education. The system is reeling under enormous pressures, and the increasing use of computers as a learning tool means privileged schools or families will continue to have an unfair advantage in the race for information expertise. We're running the risk of creating an elite of high-tech specialists. Governments and business must involve themselves urgently in addressing social imbalances caused by new technologies, and people like Howard Brun and his associates should lead the way by putting their money where their mouth is!

from Matt Cartwright

Part-time benefits

I've been working part-time for a number of years. My wife, a teacher, also works part-time and the benefits to the two of us are enormous. Much of my consultancy work is done from home, and I visit the city office usually once a week. We are with our children more than many parents, and our lives are fuller and more rewarding. Without workplace reforms and technological advances these life-enhancing innovations wouldn't have been possible.

from Stuart Pollard

Small business efficiency

A lot of nonsense is spoken about new technology. As owners of a small business, my husband and I have invested money in the latest equipment and machinery. Properly maintained, it can be operating for us twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. As a result, we need fewer staff, and our overall business costs have been dramatically reduced. Machines are cheaper than people and the business is expanding in a way that wouldn't have been possible before. If other businesses adopted updated practices they would become more efficient too, no matter how big they are.

from Leisel Rietman

Part-time insecurity

I have a degree, a diploma and three part-time jobs. I'm a waiter, a car detailer and shelf packer. All the technology, all the rhetoric, all the so-called commitment to equity by government, business and unions hasn't helped me follow my chosen career as a health professional. The reason? I live in the country!

from Nick Smyth