

Speech: Matt Hancock speaking at the Future of Work Summit

Part of the job of the Digital Secretary during London Tech Week, and we've never had a Digital Secretary during a London Tech Week before so this is very exciting, is to get out there and bang the drum.

And to make sure that we get our message across about the deep and rich ecosystem that we've got and that we're building here in the UK.

We doubled tech investment in the last year.

We are the biggest destination for tech investment outside of the USA and China.

As a politician elsewhere elsewhere in Europe might put it, we are en marche. And this isn't just about the rhetoric; it's about the depth of the ecosystem and its richness.

But the reason I specifically wanted to come to this event is because whilst the enthusiasm for the potential that tech has is unambiguous and is very strong, we also must ensure that we harness it for the betterment of society.

And the question of the future of work and the impact of technology on work is of course a very live one, which is why we're all here today.

I think that it's very important that tech companies, big and small, are addressing this question. Firstly, we think that the exponential nature of artificial intelligence means that by its nature, by the fact that it learns for itself, it has the potential to have a bigger impact than almost any technology yet invented.

As I like to put it, people talk about accelerating change. I like to think of it the other way round. Which is that we are currently living through the slowest rate of change that we're going to experience for the rest of our lives.

At the same time, we are living in an era of record levels of employment, both in the UK and around the world.

The figures out this week showed employment at record levels, both in absolute and percentage terms.

It showed womens' employment at a new record high.

And it showed real disposable income at record levels.

So the labour market performance in the UK is very, very strong. And around the world there are record employment levels in many different countries.

And this is happening at the same time as an understandable concern about the impact of technology and a sense that people don't feel this very positive economic performance for a complicated set of reasons.

So we need to understand it properly, not just with the 'lump of labour fallacy' that the robots are trying to take the existing jobs and therefore people will have nothing to do.

I think that view is static and wrong and it misses the point of human ingenuity. That it is people who create jobs and that the technology itself is creating jobs too.

But it seems to be that the risk is not that we adopt new technologies that will change jobs.

That is not the risk, because that's going to happen whether we choose for it happen or not, because that is the nature of business.

I think the risk comes from not adopting new technologies and from failing to create jobs of the future.

And that means that we have this difficult balance between the need to support the disrupters who are creating new technologies, creating the new jobs and ultimately generating productivity growth.

And at the same time supporting those who are disrupted. Because whilst in the long term improvements in technology improve productivity, we live our lives in the short term.

And it's no good having a job in the long term if you don't have one in the short term.

So we need to make sure that we support those who are disrupted as well as supporting the disruption itself.

We want to see redeployment not unemployment, by creating the jobs of the future and making sure people have the skills and capabilities to excel to accept them and generate them.

And the nature of work of course is also changing as part of this. The mundane tasks and some of the dangerous tasks are going and this is a good thing.

Take the mining industry, which has far fewer people underground than they ever have before around the world. And at the same time capabilities and human skills like empathy will be more important than ever before.

I'm an optimist for human nature. I think there are things that human beings can do that machines will never be able to do, like connecting between people and having creative sparks that make life worth living.

And this greater productivity also has a big potential upside, not only in terms of prosperity but also in terms of work life balance.

People throughout time have always worried about the impact on employment.

I declare a historic interest because when I was researching this I discovered that my forebearers were leaders of the Luddites.

And a certain Richard Hancock in the early 19th century led a gang of a thousand people in Nottinghamshire, who had been employed in the hand weaving industry. And they went and smashed the Arkwright loom all the way across Nottinghamshire and he was eventually deported to Australia.

I'm glad to say that the Hancock family has learnt a thing or two over the following two centuries and now we accept that they should have been on a digital skills training programme...

But the advantage of this greater prosperity is also an improvement in work-life balance.

Since then the amount of work that anyone has had to do on average in the UK, in order to feed themselves or feed their family and live a decent life has collapsed, in terms of the number of hours. Even over the last couple of decades this has continued. In 1995, Britons worked on average 39 hours a week and now it's 37.5 hours a week.

In my view that is using some of the increase in prosperity of the last few decades to work a bit less. Because whilst many of us love our jobs and work incredibly hard and probably work more hours than we absolutely need to, that is not true for everyone. They might prefer a better work life balance.

And then, of course, there's the skills piece, which I'm glad is now an absolute core of the debate about the future of work.

And we need to make sure everyone is able to increase their skills and capabilities to succeed in the digital age.

People who have never been online before all the way through to the very top PhDs and that we are attracting the brightest and the best from around the world.

And we're making progress on both of those matters as you may have seen in the news over the last couple of days.

Ultimately I'm optimistic that so long as we get the policy response right and so long as the tech industry more broadly responds to this challenge in the right way, then we can make a success of it.

After all, we are attracting the jobs to the UK that are building that technology driven future.

We are making sure that the UK is at the leading edge of these changes in order to try to bring that prosperity here.

And we're doing everything we can to ensure that prosperity is shared. For instance, with the new National Living Wage, which has led to the fastest

rise in pay to the lowest paid quarter of the population in history. So making sure that jobs are available, that people get the skills and that we can benefit from this technology.

But we cannot be complacent about it and we must make sure we get the analysis correct so we get the response correct as a society. And make sure that this great technological revolution that we are all involved in and living through works for everybody in our country.

That is our goal.