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Our Unpaid, Extra Shadow Work

By **CRAIG LAMBERT**

CAMBRIDGE, Mass.

THE other night at the supermarket I saw a partner at a downtown law firm working as a grocery checker, scanning bar codes. I'm sure she earns at least \$300,000 per year. Even so, she was scanning and bagging her purchases in the self-service checkout line. For those with small orders, this might save time spent waiting in slower lines. Nonetheless, she was performing the unskilled, entry-level jobs of supermarket checker and bagger free of charge.

This is "shadow work," a term coined 30 years ago by the Austrian philosopher and social critic Ivan Illich, in his 1981 book of that title. For Dr. Illich, shadow work was all the unpaid labor — including, for example, housework — done in a wage-based economy.

In a subsistence economy, work directly answers the needs of life: gathering food, growing crops, building shelters and fires. But once money comes into play, a whole range of tasks arises that do not address basic needs. Instead, such work may enable one to earn money and buy both necessities and, if possible, luxuries.

To do the work requires extra jobs, like commuting. The commuter often has to own, insure, maintain and fuel a car — and drive it — just to get to work and back. These unpaid activities ancillary to earning one's wages are examples of shadow work.

In the industrialized world, few of us live in a subsistence mode, so shadow work is ubiquitous: shopping, paying bills, housework. Digital technology — with its spam, e-mail, texting, smartphones and so on — is steadily ramping up the burden of shadow work for all whose lives revolve around its magnetic field.

Science fiction novels of a half-century ago dramatized conflicts between humans and robots, asking if people were controlling their technologies, or if the machines were actually in charge. A few decades later, with the digital revolution in juggernaut mode, the verdict is in. The robots have won. Although the automatons were supposedly going to free people by taking on life's menial, repetitive tasks, frequently, technological innovation actually offloads such jobs onto human beings.

The conventional wisdom is that America has become a "service economy," but actually, in many sectors, "service" is disappearing. There was a time when a gas station attendant would routinely fill your tank and even check your oil and clean your windshield and rear window without charge, then settle your bill. Today, all those jobs have been transferred to the customer: we pump our own gas, squeegee our own windshield, and pay our own bill by swiping a credit card. Where customers once received service from the service station, they now provide "self-service" — a synonym for "no service." Technology enables this sleight of hand, which lets gas stations cut their payrolls, having co-opted their patrons into doing these jobs without pay.

Examples abound, helping drive unemployment rates. Airports now have self-service check-in kiosks that allow travelers to perform the jobs of ticket agents. Travel agents once unearthed, perused and compared fares, deals and hotel rates. Shadow-working travelers now do all of this themselves on their computer screens. Medical patients are now better informed than ever — as a result of hours of online shadow work. In 1998, the Internal Revenue Service estimated that taxpayers spent six billion hours per year on "tax compliance activities." That's serious shadow work, the equivalent of three million full-time jobs.

Once upon a time, retail stores had employees who were not cashiers but roamed the floor, assisting customers. Go into a Wal-Mart or Target or Staples and find someone to help you locate and choose a product. Good luck. You're on your own, left to wander the aisles in search of an unoccupied staff person. (Meanwhile, you might stumble on and purchase some item you hadn't planned on buying.) Here, it's not technology, but a business tactic that cuts payroll expenses by trimming the service provided to customers — and prolongs the time those customers spend rambling around inside the store. Regardless, the result is still more shadow

work, as customers take on the job that retail salespeople once did.

Shadow work isn't always unpaid; sometimes it shows up at one's salaried job in the form of new tasks covertly added to one's responsibilities. Not long ago, human resources departments kept track of employees' vacation, personal and sick days. In many organizations, employees now enter their own data into absence management software.

One nostalgic appeal of the "Mad Men" television series is the way it evokes memories of certain amusingly dated aspects of business life, like "support staff," and even "secretaries." Support staff is becoming a quaint, antiquarian concept, a historical curiosity like typewriters, stenography and executive washrooms. We all have our own computers, of course, and we type and print our own letters, copy our own reports and mail our own missives. Even those in senior management perform these humdrum jobs.

Of course, these shadow chores never appear in one's job description, let alone justify any salary increase. Shadow work is just covertly added to our daily duties. As robotic devices replace human workers, end-users like customers and employees are taking on the remnant of the transaction that still requires wetware — a brain. New waves of technology change how things are done, and we docilely adapt — unavoidably so, as there's usually no alternative. Running a business without e-mail is hardly a viable option, but with e-mail comes spam to be evaluated and deleted — more shadow work.

TO be sure, shadow work has its benefits. Bagging one's own groceries or pumping one's own gas can save time. Shadow work can increase autonomy and enlarge our repertoire of skills and knowledge. Research on the "Ikea effect," named for the Swedish furniture manufacturer whose products often require home assembly, indicates that customers value a product more highly when they play a role in constructing it.

Still, doctors routinely observe that one of the most common complaints today is fatigue; a 2007 study pegged its prevalence in the American work force at 38 percent. This should not be surprising. Much of this fatigue may result from the steady, surreptitious accumulation of shadow work in modern life. People are simply doing a huge number of tasks that were once done for them by others.

Doing things for one another is, in fact, an essential characteristic of a human community. Various mundane jobs were once spread around among us, and performing such small services for one another was even an aspect of civility. Those days are over. The robots are in charge now, pushing a thousand routine tasks onto each of our backs.

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