

I WAS THAT TRUST-FUND KID WORKING AS A SUPERMARKET CHECKER

I take that back. I wasn't really a trust fund kid. But my grandfather was an Ag Scientist who shared the royalties from an erosion control plant he developed with his grandkids, so I did get a modest quarterly "weed money" check while I was a teenager, which was sort of like a trust fund. And as is likely for people with a PhD scientist in the family, I was affluent, a great student. And, when I was 14, a supermarket checker.

Which is why I find this pompous Peter Frase discussion, responding to these posts (and seconding Yglesias), about the relative value of grocery self-checkout lines so annoying. And since Frase says the supermarket checker I once was doesn't exist—"You don't see a lot of trust-fund kids or lottery winners working as supermarket checkers."—I feel obliged to weigh in, not with all the PhD babble I'm credentialed to throw around, but with some real details.

This whole debate started when Atrios suggested supermarkets had implemented self-checkouts to eliminate jobs.

It isn't possible for me to know, but I've long been puzzled by the widespread adoption of self-service checkouts in supermarkets and other places. It didn't seem to me that the additional capital costs would really be offset by labor cost reductions. They still require at least one hovering employee to deal with problems and card people for alcohol purchases. **In addition, people aren't very fast at using the machines so you need a higher number of machines/user to speed people through the line. We may**

not see “supermarket cashier” as a super high skilled position, but the fact remains that doing it well, as with most things, does in fact require skill. A good cashier is fast and accurate, checking people out more quickly and more efficiently.

So I’m not totally surprised that they’re pulling back a bit, though I’m sure the next scheme promising a reduction in personnel will be embraced as soon as it comes along... [my emphasis]

At which point, as the debate wore on, his central point—backed by the article he linked—was increasingly ignored: checkout machines end up not being the great deal for supermarkets they once thought they’d be.

So let me say this.

I was a damn good supermarket checker. I took great pride in what a good supermarket checker I was. It involved knowing all the codes for vegetables cold, knowing where the buttons for large items were. It involved being physically fit—with a lot of standing and bending and twisting—as well as the ability to get in a zone where you’re consistently scanning an item in one movement without breaking the rhythm of that movement, passing the item from one hand to another, left hand right hand left hand right hand. Since I was quick and consistently got the busiest registers, being a damn good supermarket checker also involved chumming up to the bagboys to make sure I always had someone bagging to keep up with my checkout pace (and, frankly, I was a pretty crummy bagger, which tended to piss off the rich ladies we served in that store when I did do their bagging). And in spite of the fact that machines are supposed to do the math for you, you do end up having to do math when the rich ladies throw weird amounts of money at you.

So I come to these self-checkout machines with a

bit of expertise on how they compare to a trained supermarket checker. I was curious to use them when they first came out—I admit I wanted to see whether I still had that old touch. And now, I buy so little in big grocery stores that I've consistently got just a few items when I do check out in a store with self-checkout lanes, so I use the machines to avoid the long lines of people with very full carts.

Even as someone who once was a damn good supermarket checker, the machines are much less efficient. Partly, that's because I don't know all the codes now, and I tend to buy odd fruits and vegetables—things like key limes and nopales—that aren't loaded into the machine properly. Partly, that's because those self-checkout machines aren't built to allow you to get into that Tayloresque rhythm. Partly, that's because you've got a suboptimal bagging set-up (and, no, I'm still not a very good bagger, but luckily I've just got myself to blame now).

The point being, at least from my somewhat informed position, Atrios' guess is correct. Those machines aren't very efficient. And while I wasn't unionized as a grocery checker (so my labor was really really cheap), I would imagine even union supermarket checker wages are less than these inefficient machines, to say nothing of consumer satisfaction.

Which is another way of seconding Atrios' supposition that these machines, in spite of the fact that they replaced workers with machines, **were not productivity improvements.**

But that point—that replacing a worker with a machine does not always result in productivity gains—appears to have been entirely lost in the debate. djw ignored it when he accepted the terms of the debate as a choice between menial jobs or greater productivity through machines. Yglesias ignored it when he blathered about whether productivity growth was good or bad for workers. Frase ignored it when he called others conservative for exulting in the disappearance of machines that didn't improve productivity.

So let me make the issue clear: We are talking about whether we should have machines (which lead to lower customer satisfaction) for machines sake or whether we should, in cases where people end up being more efficient and better for business than the machines, employ the people.

Choosing the first option—as Frase and Yglesias seem to do—is stupid for their cherished productivity and stupid for workers. (Note, the productivity battle they're fighting is likely an earlier one, on whether to shift to scanning machines in the first place.)

Now, the simple return to employing real people instead of self-service machines will not make these great jobs. I didn't have to keep up that standing and bending and twisting for a lifetime, and unlike my workmates who faced a lifetime of this work, I didn't opt to sleep with the sexually harassing boss to get better work conditions. And even the bosses in that grocery store worked night jobs, mostly as cops, to survive on the low wages.

But rather than taking an example where machines turned out not to equate to productivity gains as an opportunity to establish new lefty litmus tests on whether machines are good or bad, the lesson here ought to be that not all claims that fewer workers equal more productivity turn out to be true.