

Are robots stealing our jobs?

 By [Brian Timperley](#)

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We've seen it in the Industrial Revolution, where machines replaced countless jobs almost overnight. The socio-economic effects of that transformation have been well documented. Today, many believe we are facing the same tidal wave of change. The major difference now is that Artificial Intelligence (AI) has the capability to replace the roles of knowledge workers and highly qualified professionals - in addition to labour-intensive jobs.



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For example, retail store managers might be tempted to have a team of 10 robots performing the jobs of 40 employees. Companies designing AI technologies argue that the use of robots instead of people are numerous and speak for themselves: they wouldn't require remuneration, medical aid, pension fund contributions, leave, lunch breaks, uniforms, a canteen, change rooms or even toilets. Moreover, they can work at full production, 24/7.

These companies also argue that robots are drama free. Robots are unlikely to steal, make mistakes, join a union, go on strike, harass fellow employees, require disciplinary action, or suffer debilitating episodes of low morale. Most appealing though, is that robots cannot be injured or killed like their human counterparts, and can be used in emergency situations far too dangerous for human risk!

Indeed, from a corporate perspective, it would make good business sense for robots carry out all the menial and repetitive tasks previously undertaken by people.

Automation is here

Although many industries are experiencing a steady rise in the technological displacement of the human workforce, people underestimate just how rapidly this phenomenon is set to upend the job market over the next few decades. A 2017 report predicted that by 2030, as many as 800 million jobs could be lost worldwide to automation. The [study](#), produced by the McKinsey Global Institute, argues that advances in AI and robotics will have a major effect on everyday working lives, comparable to the shift away from agricultural societies during the Industrial Revolution. The report notes "in about 60% of occupations, at least one-third of the constituent activities could be automated, implying substantial workplace transformations and changes for all workers." In the US alone, between 39 and 73 million jobs stand to be automated — making up around a third of the total workforce.

Industries in flux

Mechanisation in the mining industry has already replaced millions of mining jobs, and this process will not abate until machines are doing 100% of the work – particularly in hazardous environments. The sad reality is, there will be fewer and fewer jobs available in large mining operations as robots continue to take over.

Then, autonomous vehicles, trains and aircraft are set to disrupt every sphere of the global transport and logistics industry. Although there are still hurdles that must be overcome before autonomous transport is rolled out en masse, make no mistake, it is expanding and will become the norm far sooner than we think.

Combat drones have also proven themselves to be a huge asset in aerial warfare. It is highly likely that these unmanned drones will supersede their manned counterparts, removing additional military personnel from the coalface of war.

And then there's the escort industry, which is suddenly dealing with an unprecedented competitor – the sex robot.

Just how popular all these AI innovations will become is anyone's guess, but there is no question significant change is coming to many industries across the globe.

Progress versus protection

In a country beleaguered by ongoing labour unrest, the South African government has made clear its willingness to protect all jobs. Looking ahead, a delicate balance between embracing progress and protecting workers will have to be achieved.

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