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Who Benefits From Workplace Automation?

Because of new products like ChatGTP, machine learning and AI have suddenly joined the list of overhyped tech in the public spotlight. As with any Great New Thing, there are people with an interest in telling the public that the New Thing is bad and will undo society, or that the New Thing is amazing and will usher us into a golden age. Due to the large volume of noise surrounding hyped-up topics, it is difficult for regular people to understand how they might be impacted and form their own opinions.

Despite all the excessive talk, it is important for people to understand and acknowledge the issue of automation in the workplace. Because of recent advances in machine learning, it is now possible to create AIs which perform some tasks as well as humans, if not better. As the field of machine learning continues to advance, there is a reasonable chance that many jobs will be automated by AI. This has been the trend for hundreds of years of human innovation, and there is little reason to believe that it won't continue.

Since the Industrial Revolution, technological advances have introduced automation in jobs that humans had been doing for hundreds, even thousands of years. Even then, automation led to many people losing their jobs which started the question of whether this was a good direction for humanity to start down (Holzer, 2022). Obviously we already made our choice as a species, but the question remains: should we continue to develop technology that makes our lives easier even though it certainly comes with many negative and even dangerous externalities?

As technology advances, jobs will become more automated. Agricultural jobs, industrial work, and jobs within creative industries are all candidates for automation. As jobs become automated and positions are made redundant, there is a chance that the prospect of finding

meaningful work will seem impossible. When it comes to automation in the workplace, there are groups on both sides of the issue that have an agenda to push and guiding principles to adhere to. It is difficult to say which side of the issue makes better points, and ultimately that determination depends on the interests of each particular stakeholder. One thing that is clear is that there needs to be a substantial conversation between stakeholders on both sides of the argument over automation in the workplace.

Stakeholder Analysis

As with any issue, there are several stakeholders who may be impacted by any decision made. In the case of automation, there exist stakeholders whose goals line up similarly, as well as stakeholders whose goals are inconsistent and may shift as the debate evolves. For the sake of simplicity, we can divide roughly all stakeholders into one of two groups.

The first group of stakeholders can be defined as those who stand to benefit from increased automation in workplaces. This group is mostly made up of business owners, media or publishing companies, and some executives. The one thing that this group of stakeholders has in common is that they make money from labor performed by others.

The second group of stakeholders are those who stand to lose money or even their livelihood due to automation. The common factor among the people in this group is that they make money from the labor that they perform, usually for people in the first group. The people that make up this second group are constantly expanding, and include cashiers, construction workers, musicians or engineers, and even movie stars.

Beneficiaries of Automation

The beneficiaries of automation have specific values that dictate why they want to increase the use of AI in the workplace. Many who stand to benefit from automation employ

people to produce work, which costs money. If employers have a large headcount, expenses will be higher than necessary, which is wasteful. If there are tools to help a company's employees produce more work in less time, it makes no sense to avoid using them. Additionally, it is a business owner's duty to reduce the cost of all inputs to their product, including labor.

If a business owner does not use these tools they may actively harm their business' competitiveness. There are various roles that are currently suitable for automation, and the number will only increase. As it stands, service, creative, industrial, and even tech jobs can be automated to some degree. As AIs become more advanced, these types of jobs will become more fully automated, and other types of roles will follow suit.

There are multiple claims that beneficiaries hold to justify increasing automation in the workplace. The main claim that business owners and employers hold is a claim of fact. The facts surrounding the situation from their point of view, is that automation exists and is not going anywhere. Additionally, businesses have many roles to fill and there is a shortage of available talent in many industries. If a business is having trouble filling roles and there is an option available to solve the problem, it is necessary to take advantage of whatever will allow the business to fill its need.

The second claim held by stakeholders who benefit from automation is a claim of definition. By definition, a job is something that a person does for their occupation. If a task is automatable, it makes no sense to pay people to perform the task. Automated tasks not performed by humans are not jobs and shouldn't be treated as such. At that point, any task that can be performed by a computer or machine is not suitable for people to perform as an occupation, such as a lamplighter, a switchboard operator, or a calculator(Gigazine, 2024).

Workers at risk of automation

On the other side of the issue, are those who stand to lose their jobs or income due to automation. The people harmed by automation hold values that enforce their position, just like the beneficiaries. One similarity in the values held by the two groups is that they are looking out for their own benefit. Those who will be harmed are people who will be displaced by automated labor. Members of this group are looking for job security and the assurance that automation will be applied equitably in the future.

Many aspects of increased automation revolve around legal issues. For creative workers, the question is about how models were trained, and where they got their data from (Scherer, 2024). People working other jobs are also generating data to train the AIs that will replace them, and nobody is getting compensated. It has not yet been decided by courts, but there is an argument to be made that data that goes into training an AI should pay royalties (Gordon-Levitt, 2023).

There are two main claims workers use to justify their beliefs. The first is a claim of value, recognizing the value of human input on a product. Many people hold the belief that human-made products are of higher quality than those made by a machine. For people who hold this belief, there will always be a value to be placed on a product or service delivered by a human. There is something to be said for human ingenuity, and it is true that the products of machine learning are essentially the product of a statistical model trying to duplicate something it has been exposed to before.

The second claim held by this group of stakeholders is a claim of policy. Many individuals have a genuine claim to the data that is being used to train machine learning models. Artists, musicians, actors, and everyone tangential to these industries has an interest in safeguarding their work. Some of the most famous actors in Hollywood have let out that their

contracts allow studios to use their performances to train AI which could replace them(JGL). For these reasons and more, it makes sense to reevaluate who owns and gets paid for this data.

Argument Question

If an individual in a group from either stakeholder wanted to explore the topic of automation further, it is important to establish a question to consider and empathize with the other side of the argument. Fortunately it seems like the parties involved have begun to hash out what needs to be discussed to answer one of the most important questions of the era. Hopefully we will soon have a more solid consensus to the question: should we continue and even expand the trend of job automation in the workplace?

Stakeholder Arguments

Beneficiary Argument

The beneficiaries of automation in the workplace want to maximize profit from whatever money making endeavor they own while minimizing obligations or risk. To some it may seem that these actions are short sighted or even detrimental to a business. These values can be better explained when viewing the actions of the beneficiaries through the lens of ethical egoism.

Ethical egoism is an ethical framework that was developed during the industrial revolution by British philosophers(Westacott, 2019). Ethical egoism is a prescriptive ethical framework that states individuals should always attempt to maximize their own self interest(Westacott, 2019). The goal in this line of thinking is to create the most beneficial outcome for oneself. Note that this does not mean one should act without considering consequences, but that the most critical consequences are those that impact the actor, which in this case are business owners and industry executives.

Business owners and executives have a significant impact on the consumer economy, including the pricing and availability of everyday goods and services. It is beneficial for everyone these businesses serve to reduce costs and increase productivity (Indeed Editorial Team, 2024). Most business owners and executives answer to investors, and their only job is to maximize profits. It is not shameful to make money, and by automating as much labor as possible business owners can increase profits and further expand their business. Ultimately, it is not the responsibility of business owners or executives to keep any individual's job and they should be ready to automate any role if need be.

Automating jobs will reduce headcounts, which means spending less on wages and facilities, leading to a much lower overhead. By reducing these kinds of costs through automating jobs, business owners reduce their obligations. Automating jobs is just another new innovation, and it would be foolish to not take advantage of new technologies. On the other hand, business owners who do not take advantage of automation risk being outcompeted.

Worker Argument

Workers at risk of losing their jobs to automation have a different set of guiding principles than beneficiaries of automation. To get an idea of why workers may feel negatively about automation, it is helpful to examine the impact using a virtue ethics framework.

Virtue ethics is a central part of philosophy. It was popularized in the West by Greek philosophers about 2500 years ago. The primary goal of virtue ethics is to be a good person by having good virtues. One extremely relevant virtue in the discussion of automation is justice. According to Thomas Aquinas, justice forces people to consider their relationship with other individuals and society at large, as well as the obligations and what they owe to one another (Kaczor & Sherman, 2020).

From the perspective of workers that produce commodities for businesses to sell, it is unjust to reduce people's income and employment through automated labor. Jobs that are fully automated may cease to exist, putting many out of work. It is unjust for those with vast resources to automate the jobs of workers whose labor made them rich in the first place. Oftentimes the data used to make an AI is not taken with consent, leaving workers without compensation for their part in training the AI that replaces them. This is an injustice to all workers, who deserve more.

In order to better support workers, there are several policy actions that should be taken. Workers displaced by AI will need to find new jobs, which will require training or education. If employers decide not to retrain employees, governments will have to pick up the slack. Policies crediting businesses for retraining employees and taxing them for closing positions can force businesses to act more justly when it comes to automation (Holzer, 2022). Governments or employers should also implement social programs like subsidizing childcare, paid leave, and wage insurance to encourage workers to accept lower paying jobs (Holzer, 2022).

The current question over automation and AI will shape our society for generations. There is potential to grasp solutions to unsolvable problems from thin air. If workers are represented equitably, they stand to gain more in terms of quality of life, sharing the wealth that they helped create. Otherwise, those who directly benefit from automation will gladly take what the workers produce while using them to train the AI that will inevitably replace the workers and fill the pockets of executives (Gordon-Levitt, 2023).

Student position

Both stakeholders in this situation have good points, and it is understandable that they each feel so strongly about their position. As someone who identifies with groups on both sides

of the argument, I find it hard to firmly pick a side to support. While working at a startup, I spent money on art and promotional materials that could have been made by AI. On the other hand, I find it hard to support a cause that puts me on the same side as billionaires willing to extract and exploit anything to make money. At the end of the day, I support progress in AI even if it means increasing automation. I hope that as AI tools to automate work develop, that we quickly progress to the point where it is clear our fears were unfounded.

I feel an alignment towards both stakeholders, which makes it hard to articulate why my position aligns with either. Part of why I support automation is because I want to work in machine learning, but also because I believe it will help progress society. In addition to increasing productivity, automation could help push us towards a more equitable society with less emphasis on working in order to survive. In a less altruistic vein, Pandora's box has already been opened and if anyone, worker or business owner, wants to be successful they will have to begin using AI tools and automated workflows. As a programmer, it is already possible to automate this job in many ways, so it is hard to treat automation from AI much differently.

In my opinion, the best way to mitigate the effects of automation on our economy and society is a combination of various social and educational programs. On the business side, businesses will almost certainly have new AI focused roles that become more common as automation rises. This is usually the case when technology replaces workers; more workers are hired to work with the new technology (Ricoh USA, n.d.). This will take education and training on the part of businesses. Governments will also have to pick up some slack, by providing things like wage insurance, expanded childcare and education, and even negative taxation for those who can't find employment due to automation. These kinds of solutions, and likely others, will be required to avoid the bulk of the doomsaying that surrounds the discussion of automation.

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