



Pink Slips for Old Technology

When you hear that robots and AI will create as many jobs as they take, that's true. But, in the meantime we've all got to eat.

For every robot deployed in the U.S., three jobs are lost. So reports, The Century Foundation's paper: [How Robots Are Beginning to Affect Workers and Their Wages](#). Do the math, it's only a matter of time until those deployments take their toll.

Make no mistake, it's going to take time before replacement jobs are plentiful enough to be meaningful to the large numbers of displaced people who need them. And, it will take time for displaced people to be meaningful to their intended new jobs. If you can't perform the new job, then you're simply not needed.

During the early part of the pandemic, we did an article on meat processors and lines of people in white coats standing shoulder to shoulder deboning chickens all day. More than COVID, we found out, can be transmitted in a meat plant.

Robot replacements in meat plants seemed best for a host of reasons. And now, Business Insider reports: Tyson [Foods Plans To Invest More Than \\$1.3B For Plant Automation](#). That was due; it's about time to call in the robots on deboning chickens...and other grim meat plant jobs. But, Tyson Foods has 139,000 employees. Who is going, who stays, and what happens to the displaced?

It will take time, energy, and billions of dollars to train, retrain, and skill up all of those who need help in making a meaningful life from the coming new technologies.

In reality, it's not robots and AI taking jobs, it's technology taking jobs. Robots and AI are just the new flavor of technology this time around. Previous tech disruptions have taken all manner of forms. [The low-tech shipping container](#) is a major disruptor.

Technology and a slow boat from China

My HP laptop, which is assembled in a factory in China, costs an extra \$2.00 to travel by container ship to my desk. Not bad. Small extra cost on my part to pay out for such a good deal. But that's only if it comes by container. If it leaves China any other way than by container ship, then it suddenly becomes prohibitively expensive to buy. Hence, I can't afford an HP laptop assembled in China.

So, I guess that I need to thank [Malcolm McLean](#), inventor of the shipping container and the container ship, for making it possible for me to own an HP laptop.

However, if I'm a longshoreman standing in an unemployment line, I could probably point to the shipping container and the container ship as the reason for my joblessness.

According to the *New York Times*, there were 35,000 longshoremen working the docks in New York City in 1960; today there are fewer than 3,500. Worldwide, the ranks of dock working jobs has been gutted, and will never return.

On April 26, 1956, McLean put 58 containers, aboard a refitted tanker ship, the SS Ideal X, and sailed it from Newark, NJ to Houston, TX.

Soon thereafter, anyone manufacturing anything would need to use a container...or lose its customers to competition that did use containers.

Where formerly twenty dockworkers could load twenty tons of cargo per hour, it now took one port crane and one operator one hour to load 400 to 500 tons of containers.

However, there was a lag...a gap...between 1956, when McLain's first container ship set sail and the virtual extinction of longshoremen's jobs. The low-tech shipping container was what really took all those tens of thousands of jobs worldwide.

When Thomas Edison opened the first electric power generating plant in New York City in 1882, he sold electricity for lighting, but he needed to manufacture lightbulbs, electrical wiring, dig trenches in the streets for pipes that would carry the current to the lightbulbs, and then wire up businesses and residences with light fixtures. In the process, he created a new occupation, the electrician.

The funny-sounding name, at first sneered at by many, would become a well-paying occupation for millions; and no job large or small would escape the transformative power of electric motors.

Eyes wide open at the new technology were factories that made things.

When the first steam-powered factory converted to electric current supplied by an electric power plant, it eliminated the woefully inefficient steam engine. Every factory owner had a choice to make: stay with steam or go to electricity.

Once again, there was a lag...a gap...between when the steam fizzled out and electric power and the electrician became ubiquitous.

Old technology was disrupted by new technology, and the old technology got a pink slip.

Such technology disruptions are taking place today. Robots, AI, and robotic process automation or RPA are the new technologies disrupting and replacing the previous, less efficient processes.

As [Kevin Roose, technology columnist](#) for The New York Times, puts it: "All over the world, executives are spending billions of dollars to transform their businesses into lean, digitized, highly automated operations. They are racing to automate their own work forces to stay ahead of the competition, with little regard for the impact on workers," says Roose.

Actually, commerce and industry have no choice. The lessons that shipping containers and electric-powered factories have taught industry are simple: change or perish.

An engineer at Kodak invented the video camera, at which the Kodak board sneered and dismissed as folly. Bad decision. Video photography is everywhere today; Kodak isn't.

Japanese high school girls militated with cellphone companies to put cameras in their phones, and the phone companies that did so are still around. The others? Well, when was the last time you snapped a photo with a camera not in your phone?

This time around, technology disruption is happening much faster, but the lag, the gap between new jobs showing up will still be as slow, simply because no one is doing much about getting displaced workers ready.

The pandemic of 2020 has only served to accelerate that transformation process across most every industry worldwide.

“People are looking to achieve very big numbers,” reports [Mohit Joshi, the president of Infosys](#), a technology and consulting firm with a raft of mega clients like Daimler Mercedes-Benz, Bank of America, Goldman Sachs, Johnson & Johnson, IBM, Lockheed Martin, and Accenture. Infosys works to help these corporate giants to automate their operations. “Earlier they had incremental, 5 to 10 percent goals in reducing their work force,” explained Joshi. “Now they’re saying, ‘Why can’t we do it with 1 percent of the people we have?’”

And they are doing it. Not only Tyson Foods.

“More than 120 million workers globally will need retraining in the next three years due to artificial intelligence’s impact on jobs, according to an IBM survey.” Management consulting firm Oliver Wyman, writes: The number of individuals who will be impacted is immense. The world’s most advanced cities aren’t ready for the disruptions of artificial intelligence.

Wish Studs Terkel was still around

[Studs Terkel](#) spent forty-five years of his life interviewing working people about their jobs.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning writer asked a lifetime of questions resulting in 9,000 audiotapes for his Studs Terkel Show that aired over radio station WFMT in

Chicago. That's about 200 interviews a year for over four decades. The interviewees ranged from titans like Simone de Beauvoir, Bertrand Russell, and JK Galbraith to simple, ordinary working folk.

AI, with a neat algorithm that could parse audiotape, might well tell us lots of interesting things about these people and the patterns of their work lives. Terkel was his own algorithm, and he put the best of himself into a bunch of books on people, their jobs, how they worked and why.

One of the themes that reoccurs regularly in the interviews is that of people feeling that their jobs were mindless, repetitive, boring, and most certainly a job, as more than a few said, fit only for a robot. Jobs that they prayed their children wouldn't have to endure to make a living. But thank God for that mindless job, because without it there'd be no bread on the table at home.

In one of his most famous books, [Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do](#), Terkel distilled the essence of what he was hearing about jobs from those interviews: "It is about a search, too, for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying. Perhaps immortality, too, is part of the quest. To be remembered was the wish, spoken and unspoken, of the heroes and heroines of this book."

Most of the people that Terkel lovingly and skillfully interviewed are gone, and so too are their mindless jobs. Fortunately, no one has to tell their kids to get a job as a key punch operator or to stand all day at a turret lathe or learn to operate an elevator.

Technology has already taken on that task for us. Those old technologies got their pink slips a long time ago.

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