

People afraid of robots much more likely to fear losing their jobs, suffer anxiety

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"Technophobes"—people who fear robots, artificial intelligence and new technology that they don't understand—are much more likely to be afraid of losing their jobs to technology and to suffer anxiety-related mental health issues, a Baylor University study found.

More than a third of those in the study fit its definition of "technophobe" and are more fearful of automation that could lead to job displacement than they are of potentially threatening or dangerous circumstances such as romantic rejection, public speaking and police brutality, according to the study.

"If you're afraid of losing your job to a robot, you're not alone," said researcher Paul McClure, a sociologist in Baylor's College of Arts & Sciences. "This is a real concern among a substantial portion of the American population. They are not simply a subgroup of generally fearful people."

Previous research has found that employees with little job security suffer from poorer [mental health](#) and that unemployment and job insecurity are often linked to heart disease and mortality rates.

McClure's study found that:

- 37 percent of participants fit the definition of a "technophobe"—someone who is either afraid or very afraid of such automation as robots in the workforce, decision-making

robots, [technology](#) they don't understand, [artificial intelligence](#) and people who trust artificial intelligence to do work.

- Those in historically marginalized groups—women, non-whites and the less educated—report being most fearful of technology.
- Technophobes are three times more likely to be fearful of unemployment when compared to others, and nearly three times more likely to fear not having enough money in the future.
- Technophobes have 95 percent greater odds of not being able to stop or control worrying when compared to others, and 76 percent greater odds of feeling as if something awful might happen.

The study—"You're Fired,' Says the Robot: The Rise of Automation in the Workplace, Technophobes, and Fears of Unemployment"—is published in *Social Science Computer Review*, a peer-reviewed publication in its 35th year.

Billionaire and Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban tweeted recently that "Automation is going to cause unemployment and we need to prepare for it." Meanwhile, Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates made headlines when he called for a tax on robots—to be paid by their owners or makers—to compensate for losses due to automation and to help fund retraining so workers can transition to other fields.

For his study, McClure used data from Wave 2 of The Chapman Survey of American Fears, an annual national random survey. In it, 1,541 respondents were asked about their fears and worries about politics, crime, natural and man-made disasters, technology, mental health and unemployment.

They also were asked about their anxieties, worries, sleep patterns, restlessness, inability to relax, susceptibility to irritation and feelings of dread.

Anxiety about job loss to automation is nothing new, McClure said, noting that 19th-century textile workers in England destroyed new machines to protest against employers who used inventions that allowed for faster and cheaper labor by less-skilled workers.

But some researchers in economics caution that the impact of robotics and artificial intelligence in the next several years will be much more rapid than job displacement of the past—particularly for those with routine job responsibilities. Those potentially could span the blue- and white-collar divide, from truck drivers and warehouse workers to loan officers and paralegals, rather than manual laborers in non-routine jobs or workers in creative fields, McClure said.

While technology visionaries contend that new markets with new job opportunities have emerged and that developing countries will benefit economically, "many people in the United States suspect that technology will not deliver widespread financial security, nor will it be a panacea for the world's underprivileged," McClure said.

"People in certain occupations may legitimately fear losing their jobs to robots and software that can work for cheaper and for longer hours than any human."

While a transformation would most likely be gradual, it could trigger a major social unrest among those who are displaced from their jobs, McClure said.

"Anticipating the individual and social outcomes is a matter worth pursuing," he said. "If these fears are misplaced, more research needs to be done to dispel technophobia as a legitimate social concern.

"Regardless of whether technology might lead to certain people's [jobs](#) becoming obsolete, the fear itself is real."

Provided by Baylor University

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