

# More robots, more work

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Credit: Charissa Freese: Gerdien Wolthaus Paauw

Robots will take over all jobs, so it is often thought. On the contrary, say Charissa Freese and Ton Wilthagen: robots will create jobs. It's just that these new jobs will be different, and the challenge is to anticipate which jobs will disappear, which ones will change, and what the new ones will be like – and when. Tilburg University aims to prepare employers and employees to the labor market of the near future.

In recent years, many jobs in banking and insurance have disappeared – a trend that continues to this day. And even more jobs will disappear through the rise of artificial intelligence, researcher Charissa Freese observes. The fear this prospect instills in people is as real as it is

justified, but more technology also has a positive side: research shows that, over the past quarter century, work has become cleaner, safer, and less demanding physically.

In healthcare, robots and home electronics will reduce the number of jobs for [care workers](#), but at the same time they will create jobs in designing, programming, installing, and supporting technology. And not just for highly educated workers, Freese points out. Some manual work is, and will for the time being continue to be, very hard for robots to do, such as cleaning, cutting hair, working precious metals, and making furniture. It is repetitive work especially that will be taken over by robots or computers, making human skills such as creativity and interpersonal contact all the more important. Not in the least because in work, trust is key. Who will let a [robot](#) shave them? Who will think nothing of getting into a self-driving taxi? In the [new jobs](#), it is human aspects that often matter most: creativity, human contact, coaching, skill.

## **Low-skilled workers complain that they feel like robots more and more**

"Robotization is often implemented without the impact on workers and jobs being properly considered. One side-effect of robotization is "leftover" or residual jobs; not all operations can be fully robotized and workers become little more than steps in the robotized process. They experience zero autonomy and the work pressure is high – a very stressful situation to be in. Take the crane operators in the Rotterdam port area. Today computerized cranes offload container carriers: the operators no longer physically operate the cranes from their driver's seat, but remote control the cranes from behind screens in a control center. They only have to revert to manual control when something goes wrong or when there's a special shipment. That is completely different work and unions have good reason to be concerned about such changes.

Employers should be more ethically attuned to the quality of the jobs they create. And that is a cultural shift."

## **How can that shift be brought about?**

"It is important that companies and workers look ahead and learn new skills early on. To teachers, a smartboard doesn't just mean putting down the chalk and picking up an electronic pen. They are also expected to use the new possibilities smartboard offer. And that requires training and coaching – on a permanent basis. We must aim to keep workers fit for the future, and there's still much room for improvement there. Take the current job market. It exhibits a major mismatch: a serious shortage of jobs yet high unemployment. New professions come into being for which no turnkey training program is available. Ten years ago, we couldn't imagine the position of app developer. Schools and companies must work together much more closely to prevent mismatches."

## **What advice would you give companies?**

"Anticipate: follow trend watchers, hire innovation managers, think ahead. And when robotization is on the table, don't wait to have a discussion about fundamentals. What impact will robotization have on [jobs](#) and workers? What will robots do, what will workers do? How can robots and people work together as effectively as possible? Sadly, costs and benefits are often the only issues to be considered, with robotization simply being viewed as an investment decision that ignores the effects on workers.

## **Have any role models come to the fore?**

"Yes. It is often such family businesses as VDL that are leading the way: they have a clear long-term vision and accentuate caring for their staff.

These trailblazers also have a chief HR officer with outspoken ideas who from the word go engages in discussions about robotization and digitization. But legislation too can help improve ethical awareness. For example, the EU is looking to ban constant monitoring of workers as well as to prescribe human contact in the workplace."

Provided by Tilburg University

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