

Declining job quality, not job loss, set to mark next decade of warehouse work

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Amazon delivery trucks are a familiar sight on American roads and new warehouses are popping up across the country to keep up with the growing demands of e-commerce.

A [new report](#) from researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago's Center for Urban Economic Development examines how [technological changes](#) in warehouses across the U.S. might impact workers and reshape working conditions.

Rather than robots and automation triggering extensive unemployment and displacement over the next decade, new technology will likely deliver a transformative and potentially [negative impact](#) on the character and quality of warehouse work, according to the study.

"Over 1 million people work in warehouses across the U.S., a number that is growing due in part to the rise of e-commerce," said the study's lead author Beth Gutelius, associate director of the center and senior researcher at the Great Cities Institute at UIC. "The pressure to meet quick order turnaround, driven largely by Amazon's standard-setting delivery promises, has contributed to onerous labor conditions in warehouses across the country, conditions that appear poised to worsen in the coming years."

Gutelius and co-author Nik Theodore, director of the center and UIC professor of urban planning and policy, conducted in-depth industry research and interviews with an expansive group of stakeholders, including industry analysts and consultants, third-party logistics operators, retailers, brands and technology providers.

Some of the findings include:

- Work intensification due to an "increase in the workload and pace of work, with new methods of monitoring workers"
- The potential introduction of "new health and safety hazards, as well as increased employee turnover due to overwork and burnout"
- De-skilling jobs, where traditional roles are broken down into

subtasks and technologies are applied, which removes the skills previously required of working people and can lead to lower wages and more job insecurity

- Increased surveillance at work as a result of new technologies for [worker](#) oversight, like algorithmic management, wearable devices, and autonomous mobile robots.

Another key finding relates to the demographics of the warehouse workforce. Workers of color constitute 66 percent of front-line workers in the warehousing industry but just 37 percent of the American labor force. As a result the researchers note that the "effects of technological change in the warehouse industry will be borne disproportionately by people of color."

Warehouse workers aren't necessarily doomed, Gutelius cautions.

"Warehouse operators stand to benefit significantly from new technologies, but it's critical that these gains be shared, that workers be involved in identifying which efficiencies should be prioritized and what hazards are being introduced, and that experimentation unfolds with regard for more than just productivity increases," she said.

More information: The Future of Warehouse Work: Technological Change in the U.S. Logistics Industry. laborcenter.berkeley.edu/future-of-warehouse-work/

Provided by University of Illinois at Chicago

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