

Study: COVID speeds up human vs machine standoff over work

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Indian laborers work at a building construction site in Gauhati, India, Monday, Oct. 19, 2020. (AP Photo/Anupam Nath)

As automation and online work gain ground, organizers of the annual Davos forum are projecting employers will split work equally between machines and people by 2025, with the coronavirus pandemic

accelerating changes in the labor market.

The World Economic Forum, in a report released Wednesday on the future of [jobs](#), expects that a new division of labor between humans and machines will upend and eliminate some 85 million jobs globally across 15 industries. But it also expects that 97 million new roles will emerge in sectors like artificial intelligence, content-creation and "the care economy" involving kids and the elderly.

Two years ago, the forum predicted more jobs created 133 million—and fewer lost—75 million.

"In essence, the rate of job destruction has gone up and the rate of job creation has gone down," said WEF managing director Saadia Zahidi.

"The good news is that overall, the jobs that are being created still are in greater numbers than the jobs that are being destroyed. But the rate has changed and that's obviously going to make it difficult for workers to find their next role."

The forum, an event organizer and think tank, says jobs involving data entry, accounting and administrative support are set to decline, while it pointed to upsides for "frontline workers" like nurses, grocery store workers, [postal workers](#) and care workers who have shown their importance during the COVID crisis.

"For those workers, there may be some good news in the future because there will be upward wage pressure and much more recognition of the type of work they do," Zahidi said. But sectors like aviation and tourism, which have been "on pause" during the crisis, could come under intense pressure if the COVID crisis continues, leading to permanent job losses, she said.

Meanwhile, automation is taking on a greater importance in the global

economy overall.

"When you look at the tasks of today, in just another five years, by 2025, those tasks will be equally done by machines, if you will—so robots and algorithms—as people," Zahidi said in an interview at WEF headquarters overlooking Lake Geneva. "However, that doesn't mean that new jobs won't emerge and they will certainly be emerging, from all that we are able to find in the data."

The report, which also analyzed the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the U.S. [labor market](#) between February and May, found that most displaced workers were on average young, women, and lower-waged employees.

The COVID-19 crisis has had a far worse impact on people with lower education than the 2008 financial [crisis](#), and is more likely to deepen inequalities, the report said.

The report calls on governments to do more to help workers by strengthening social safety nets, boosting educational offerings and providing incentives to invest in the jobs of tomorrow.

Conducted with private-sector partners, WEF's report is based on projections from business executives, generally in human relations and strategy divisions, representing nearly 300 companies worldwide that employ some 8 million people.

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