35 percent of UK jobs may be at risk from automation

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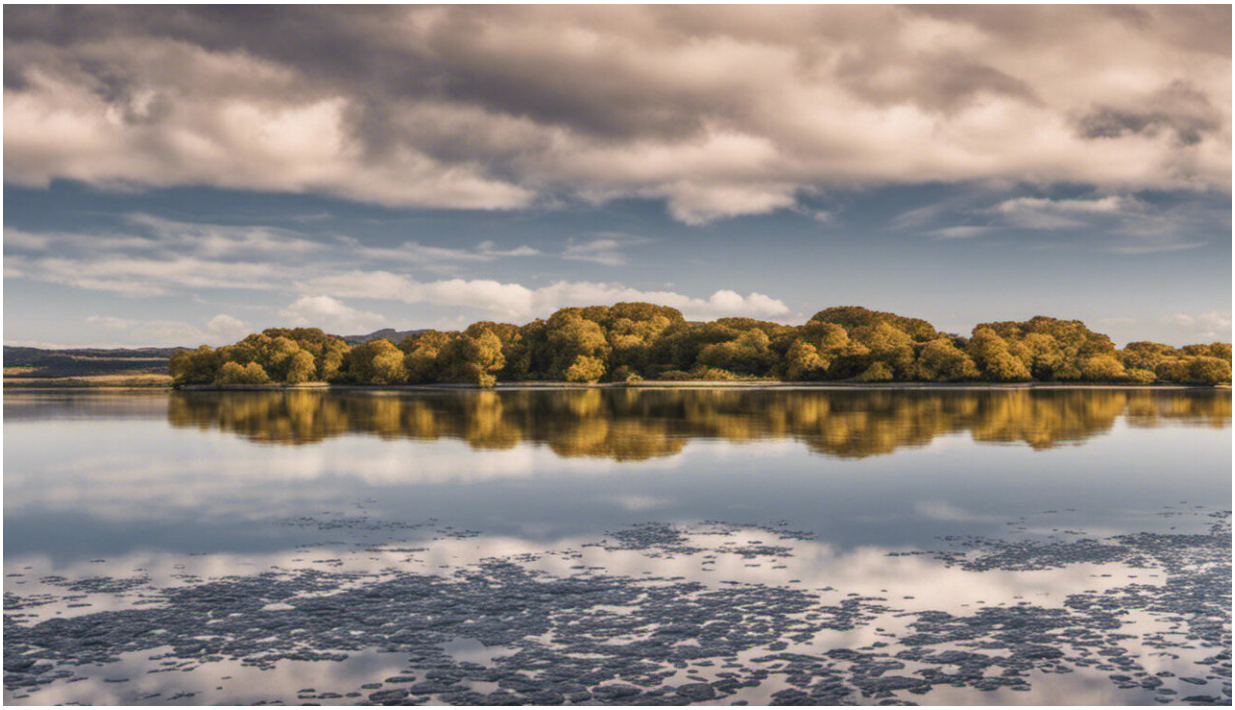

Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

Fear of losing our jobs to those who can perform tasks faster, cheaper and perhaps with more creativity, has been longstanding. Equally, the introduction of a new leisure class with more free-time to spend once liberated from mundane, repetitive and boring tasks has also long been promised. With some forecasts indicating that within 20 years, 35 % of

UK jobs are at risk from automation, it might be time to sort the job terminators out from the tumble dryers.

When Café X opened a few weeks ago in San Francisco selling coffee made by a resident robot, baristas were highlighted in a list of jobs which were under increasing threat from automation. Research published last year by Oxford University and the business advisor Deloitte, indicated that in the UK there is a 77 % probability of 1.3 million 'repetitive and predictable' administrative and operative roles being automated.

What seemed to be unexpected was the range of jobs at risk from our cybernetic cousins. While factory workers have been familiar with automation taking over repetitive, precise and physically arduous tasks for decades, the list also cited work performed by the police, teachers and even senior executives as amenable to computerisation. Similar research in the US by the consultancy firm, McKinsey also backs up these findings.

Perhaps to buck what might be seen as a passive approach and given that insurance writers topped the 'at risk list', it was recently reported that the insurance company Aviva apparently recently wrote to all of its 16 000 UK workers asking them if they consider that their job could be automated. In a twist, and firmly putting the ghost back in the machine, the carrot for full disclosure was that the self-selecting staff would be retrained.

Conceivably the current debate is prompted by the seemingly daily inundation of autonomous device innovations, exemplified by driverless cars as under development by Google and others, leading the way. Alongside, this is the deliberately imperceptible and ubiquitous nature of the technology dubbed the 'internet of things'.

So how worried should we be? Anyone familiar with the term Luddite could be forgiven for responding by asking, 'wasn't it ever thus?' The more optimistic forecasters point out that while innovation drives change - resulting in social adjustments - the reality is rarely exclusively negative, straight-forward or even predictable.

McKinsey research points out that the discussion is misleading if by 'job' we mean 'occupation', going on to say that only some functional activities will be automated, leading to a redefinition of occupations in the same way that automatic cash machines changed that of the bank clerk. The researchers found that less than 5 % of US occupations could currently be completely automated. They did however also find that 60 % of occupations could have around a third of their activities automated.

Additionally, the more sanguine remind us that after two centuries of automation the net sum is not less jobs, but more. Another Deloitte study found that while automation had reduced agriculture and manufacturing employment in the UK over the preceding 150 years, the growth in business and technology services, along with the caring and creative professions had more than offset this downward trend.

Rather than either a dystopian or utopian future, the reality is likely to be more mundane as policy and law makers get to work tackling issues such as culpability in the instance of driverless car accidents. Just a few days ago, Bill Gates even suggested that there should be a tax applied to robots that replaced human workers. Currently, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are asking the European Commission to establish a legal 'status' for robots to exploit their economic potential, while guaranteeing citizen safety and security, including job security.

And will discussions about responsibilities also bring us to those of 'robotic rights?' Well that raises the prospect of Artificial Intelligence (AI), beyond the scope of this article…unless my computer disagrees?"

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