

## No Luddites Left Behind

*Three ways to talk about our automated future with the people it displaces*

A fellow audience member stood up after a talk on the Socioeconomic Impact of AI in New York City.

“I work for the cable company from home. I make sales calls every day on commission,” he said. He appeared over 50, and as though he likely made his calls from a homeless shelter: unkempt, old clothes, a distinct odor about him.

“How is AI going to affect *my* job?” he asked.

The panelists hesitated, silence like eggshells as the man gazed up at them in earnest. Before he spoke, the talk had focused matter-of-factly on retraining, reskilling, growth mindsets, and constant learning. It starts with our education system, the panelists said. We need to grow curious enough to re-learn new skills every few years, they noted. Today’s jobs will not exist tomorrow, they added. Get used to this new reality, they insisted.

But how exactly do you talk about this to the man standing in front of you, a man with a job that may soon be automated out of existence?

We often tout the inevitability of innovation and preach the need to keep up, or else. But to prepare for a future that promises mass displacement and unemployment, we must speak about automation and AI with more care.

Rapid-fire jargon, fear-mongering headlines, and dismissiveness of those not already invested in tech will only divide us and create greater chasms between the haves and have-nots. By using plain English to explain AI, emphasizing optimism, and educating with inclusion for workers everywhere, we can create a future that ensures no modern-day Luddites are left behind.

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### **Automation: Not always embraced with open arms**

We’ve all heard the stats: [45 percent](#) of activities people do at work can be automated, and 60 percent of all jobs could see 30 percent or more of their activities automated. 49 percent of time spent at work could be automated, too—the [equivalent](#) of 1.1 billion workers globally.

Millions of truck drivers will let go of their obsolete steering wheels. Hoards of data analysts will abandon error-riddled spreadsheets and their manual formulas. Business decisions will land in the laps of automated algorithms, not executives. And that salesman in the audience may likely hang up his phone soon.

Certainly all of this change will save businesses time, but it won’t save workers’ morale. Behind the buzzwords, forecasts, and statistics are the faces of everyday people who

just want to keep their jobs. Even as many workers will strive to learn, understand, and prepare—much like the man at the AI panel did—many won't have the option to remain employed. The consequences could be dire.

High-skilled, well-educated people will fare better in this future. After all, 13 percent of the U.S. population still doesn't use the [internet](#). But [many Americans](#) don't think they need to adapt, with 80 percent saying their job definitely or probably will exist in its current form in 50 years. And while [46 percent](#) believe AI will harm people by taking away jobs, just 23 percent believe it will have serious, negative implications.

So while talks of our automated future are framed as exciting learning opportunities to the educated knowledge worker—Take a MOOC! Learn to code!—the reality is that these initial changes will hurt most of the nation. Sure, relieving an executive of everyday burdens to focus on strategy is a plus. But when your skillset was proud mastery of those tedious tasks, automation doesn't sound so freeing.

I think about my welder dad, who came home every night with fresh burns seared onto his arms. No matter that robot limbs can be sprayed with fire and never file for worker's compensation, and will never know the pain of pink slips or fear of pay cuts. My dad wants to keep his job, scars and all. So, too, do most salesmen want to keep cold calling.

What, then, can we do to move society forward — to reap the many gains of an automated future, without the suffering at the hands of millions more?

Peter Drucker famously said that "efficiency is doing things right; effectiveness is doing the right things." The pace of tech change pushes us toward efficiency, but doing the right thing in a world of AI and automation is not simply a matter of speed, but a matter of humanity. In a time of ideological extremes, [distrust of authorities](#), and divisive rhetoric that pits progressive city-dwellers against the small-town working class, we need to educate *everybody* on the impact of technology—now, more than ever.

### **Three ways to talk about our automated future to those it will displace**

**1. Use plain English to explain the technology.** As complex as concepts like machine learning and neural networks sound at first blush, they are easily grasped when explained with patience, empathy, and examples that help laypeople understand. I've noticed that even the most technical, MIT-trained PhDs slow their speech and offer helpful analogies to people who bravely tell them, "I didn't understand what you meant." But many people don't have the chance to express their confusion, or will simply stop listening when they're unable to understand. Lost opportunities to educate, connect, and employ more people in advanced technology can stem simply from poor word choices, and will only compound when automation continues to proliferate in use.

It should be our duty to society and our economic future to clearly explain AI and artificial intelligence to children, to the undereducated, and to the people whose jobs will be dismantled by technology first.

What does this look like? It's as simple as using relatable illustrations to show how an algorithm differentiates between two objects or words. It might be that you only use technical jargon or buzzwords when accompanying them with real-life examples, e.g. "Big Data might include something like the records of every vote cast on a ballot in the U.S. from the last century." Or that you use Warren Buffet's trick of pretending he's writing or speaking to his sisters, Doris and Bertie, whenever he's tempted to use unclear verbiage.

At a recent AI Meetup I attended, I noticed the group leaders' care in painstakingly defining many of the terms they used. It made a difference; at the next meeting, there were more newcomers, women, and people of color than ever. When we use words that most people understand, we invite more people in.

**2. Speak with optimism, not simply fear.** Imagine how empowering it'd be if we replaced the robots-rendering-us-prehistoric narrative with, instead, a narrative of hope: *Your core human strengths are more valuable than ever. You have an important role to play. Your skills aren't worthless.* By pairing our automation fears with automation optimism, we can ensure we are speaking empathetically to those who may suffer from job displacement. For example, a bartender may someday lose her work to a robot, but her conversational flair and cocktail-recipe knowledge can aid even a Watson-run restaurant. A marketing analyst whose handpicked research could someday be collected by algorithms could, instead, become a guru at translating and tailoring insights for individual executives' needs.

After all, scare tactics don't work: A couple years ago, I was in the backseat of a shared Lyft when my fellow passenger asked the driver his thoughts on self-driving cars. "It's not gonna work, man," the cabbie replied. "We're gonna f\*ck with them on the road. Those cars won't be safe, because we'll cut them off every stop sign, every stoplight."

His words reminded me of Ned Ludd's followers, who, blindsided by new technology, protested progress by destroying the machines. This driver resisted against self-driving cars taking his fares, rendering him an accessory. I wish I'd interjected to assure him that he had so many job options he might not even realize—a custom tour guide for self-driving buses, or radio host for new passenger listening opportunities. I speak up now: Those of us armed with tech savvy should advise those who are fearful, and take responsibility to help them find their silver lining potential, no matter the dismal headlines we've all heard.

**3. Be inclusive in addressing everyone's automated future.** Our optimism can't be disconnected from reality, however. Glorifying future jobs like training algorithms and working alongside robot colleagues does not spell opportunity for the working class, but rather depicts a sci-fi movie scene they can't begin to fathom on their factory floors. So

while a classroom of corporate learners may nod their heads and anticipate next quarter's coding course, most Americans balk at or dismiss this speak.

By spreading the gospel of automation more widely and inclusively, we can help educate rather than ignore. Let's give talks about AI in rural libraries, public schools, prisons, town halls, and local Manpowers, describing how everyday jobs might change and what that could look like. Let's explain upskilling methods like MOOCs and programming languages by relating which workers can benefit from this knowledge, and how they can use it. Let's not forget that many still don't have smartphones, broadband internet, or university degrees.

Rather than glossing over low-wage jobs as simply collateral damage of innovation, let's talk to those whose jobs may disappear. Let's look them in the eyes and address their worldviews, circumstances, and feelings. It's the right, and human, thing to do.

### **The audacity of automation**

Back at the AI panel, the panelists carefully weighed in on the gentleman in the audience's question.

The panel didn't say the man wouldn't have a job in 2 years, or that it was time for him to learn to code from Khan Academy. Or that his company would go bankrupt in a world of automation and AI. The blunt language from the panel's earlier discussions softened into spoonfed advice that no longer wrote off a person's stagnant skills as a thing of a past, but framed their knowledge as a hopeful base for the future. This time, they spoke with care.

They told the man that his job would likely get easier over time: better data would help him target customers who are more likely to buy, so he'd waste less time. He would see more impact in his work, they said, through reaching the people who need the product or service most. Eventually, they told him, he could automate his calls so that he could just handle the parts that require human intervention—checking in to see how the service was satisfying the customer, maybe. Altogether, his job could become more enjoyable, more financially rewarding, and more efficient.

The man took voracious notes, sat down, then stayed behind after to mingle with the other attendees. I noticed people reluctantly shook his soiled hands as he networked, collecting business cards with gumption. I wondered if he felt like his question was heard, if he felt he had a place in this automated future. If, at the end, he felt like he belonged.