Is your job safe from automation?

by Iain Hopkins
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A robot can spit out data, but it can't create a strategic plan or mediate a conflict between two employees – at least not yet. That was the resounding message from a 2016 McKinsey report on job automation.

Two years on and job automation remains a sensitive issue for HR leaders who are increasingly concerned not just about the impact of automation on the wider workforce but also its potential to irreparably change their own jobs.

McKinsey's report, *Where Machines Could Replace Humans*, found that certain types of tasks are more likely to be automated than others. Robots are likely to impact "mundane, repetitive" roles, while those that that require creativity, problem-solving, decision-making, or people skills are less threatened.

A concurrent study by Oxford University's Michael Osborne and Carl Frey found that HR administrative roles have a 90% chance of being automated by 2035. However, HR manager, director and officer roles are much less likely to be replaced by robots.

Marie Moynihan, Dell's SVP, global talent acquisition, has seen automation seep into her area of expertise; however, she told *HR Tech News* that it's not something to be feared but rather something to be embraced.

"Talent acquisition is one of the HR functions that has been an early adopter of machine learning and AI technologies. I see a great opportunity for technology to help funnel the most relevant talent for opportunities within my organization. That will in turn reduce the sourcing component of the recruiting role," she told *HR Tech News*.

Moynihan envisages technology forcing talent acquisition specialists to evolve, to become more like account managers and therefore more strategic in their roles.

"They'll focus on qualifying roles upfront, providing expertise in the selection process, and managing the customer experience, both for hiring managers and candidates. Technology will ease some of the time consuming administrative burden," she said.

What other HR roles might be under threat or at least need to evolve to stay relevant? Rowan Tonkin, senior director of HR transformation at Oracle, suggested roles that have at their core the following tasks might be targeted:

Data collection and processing. Most bots in the workplace are already undertaking data processing work. The most widely used form of this is timesheet automation.

Responding to HR inquiries. Bots are currently used the most in responding to straightforward inquiries from employees and with machine learning they'll be able to respond to increasingly complex questions and scenarios. "You could be asking a query about your payslip or checking how much annual leave you have," Tonkin said. "It's a query-based tool, but it's like having a conversation – you're doing it like a text message or you're typing it into a computer and asking a question.."

Recruitment. As Moynihan has already suggested, AI can help HR wade through mountains of data, such as social media profiles or CVs to find the right person for the job. AI could also potentially mean the end of unconscious bias in recruitment.

Tonkin urged HR professionals concerned about their future job security to think about the types of roles that will "never go out of style" due to the difficulty of replicating unique human elements or traits. "That's the humanistic or human-orientated roles that robotics won't ever be able to replace, certainly not in my lifetime at least," he said.

McKinsey's research suggested that managing and developing staff is the hardest work activity to automate, closely followed by those that require skills including negotiation, collaboration, communication, mediation and empathy. The report also suggested that these skills and traits are all imminently 'transferrable' to other roles.

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