Me, My Job, and AI: Preserving Worker Identity Amid Technological Change

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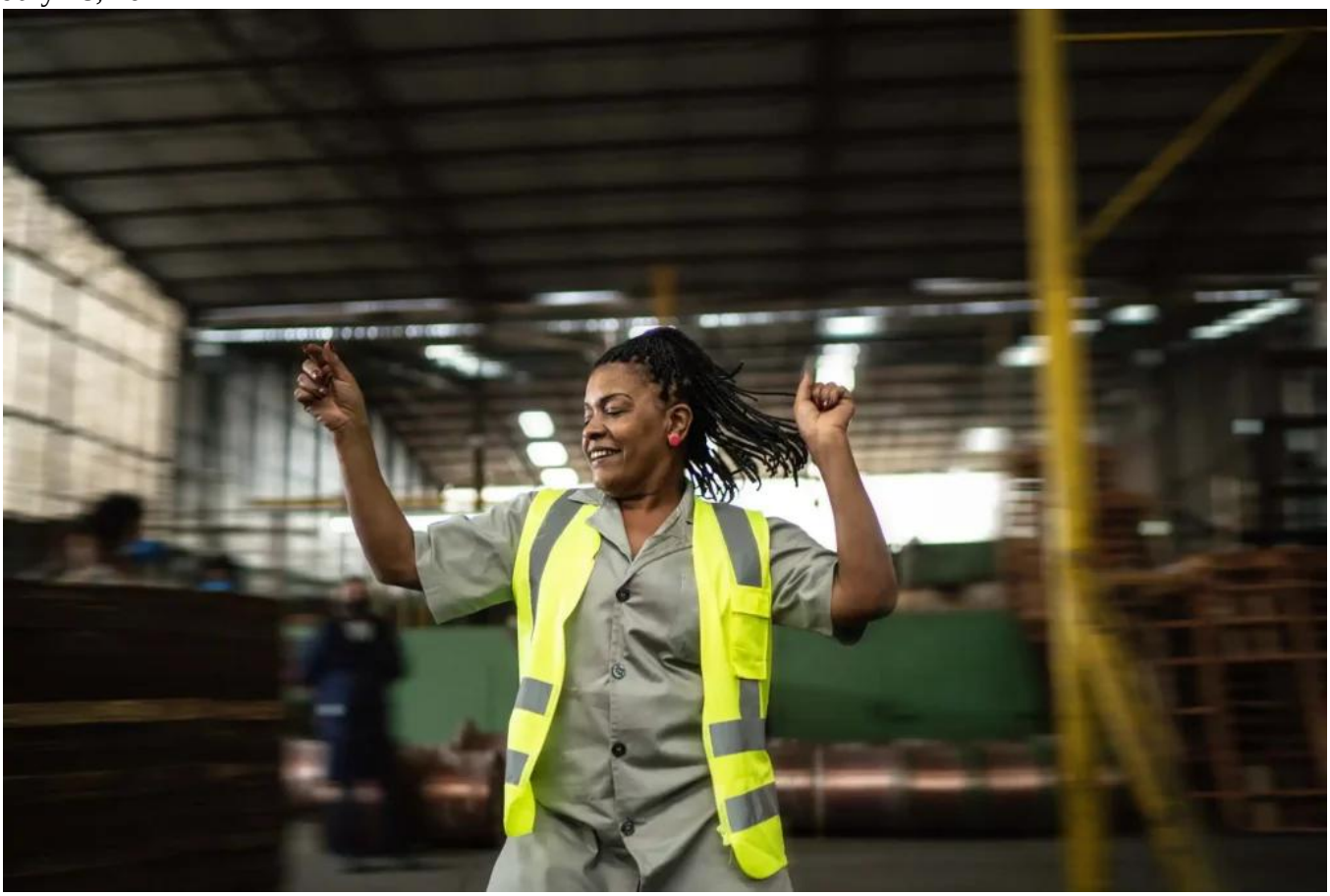

“What do you do?” It’s an innocuous enough question, an element of small talk that plays out routinely in social settings all over the world. But the response—from warehouse associate to psychological scientist to countless other occupations—often reflects more than just how an individual earns their living. It can also be a key part of how they identify, how others see them, and their sense of social validation.

So employers shouldn’t be surprised if workers feel threatened when technologies based on artificial intelligence (AI) take over certain aspects of their job. The workers may rightfully suspect that the business priorities that usually drive AI implementation—such as increased efficiency or greater computational power—may call those identities into question or even lead to job losses.

That perception isn’t inevitable, however. In a recent article in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Eva Selenko (Loughborough University) and colleagues wrote that under certain conditions, AI can *enhance* how individuals experience their work. For instance, AI-induced changes that free workers from tedious and repetitive tasks can help them avoid mistakes, focus on more interesting tasks, and

achieve better results. An example is a surgeon operating with real-time AI analysis of operative videos, which reduces the duration of surgeries and improves patients' outcomes.

"We argue that the conditions for AI to either enhance or threaten workers' sense of identity derived from their work depends on how the technology is functionally deployed (by complementing tasks, replacing tasks, and/or generating new tasks) and how it affects the social fabric of work," wrote Selenko and colleagues. "If identities and their functions are threatened, undermined, or lost, this not only is upsetting for the individual, whose well-being is affected, but also will result in a variety of identity-protection responses. Conversely, if AI-induced change supports identity functions, and brings people closer to their ideal work selves, people can restructure, adapt, and expand their work identity."

The researchers conducted a broad review of literature about the effect of AI on workers and developed an integrative functional-identity framework to expand understanding of those effects and help employers implement AI more constructively.

Complement, replace, create

Defining AI as "a collection of interrelated technologies used to solve problems that would otherwise require human cognition," Selenko and colleagues reviewed AI implementation across business sectors and the largely polarized discourse that has resulted. Currently, they wrote, "popular opinions on AI tend to fall into two camps: those that foretell doom," reflecting distrust and concerns of dehumanization, "versus those that foretell utopia," reflecting excessive trust of the technology.

The reality is more nuanced. The researchers acknowledged that "interacting with or being managed by a self-learning, unintelligible algorithmic process that acts in a quasihuman way may feel uncanny." But they also shared research showing that workers can warm to or even embrace AI, contingent on the nature of the tasks involved and economic and structural factors.

To illustrate their framework, Selenko and colleagues described AI as having three essential functional capabilities in the workplace:

- Complementing and supporting existing human tasks;
- Replacing existing human work; and
- Creating new human tasks and subsequently new work roles.

Examples of AI supporting existing human tasks include real-time monitoring or intervention in work environments to improve on-the-job safety. These task-related changes can affect the social fabric of work, but workers can move toward accepting them if they experience the change gradually, feel they have a voice in the implementation, and learn new skills and competencies, ideally within transitional "safe spaces."

When AI replaces existing work—in functions such as refilling stock in a warehouse, diagnosing health matters, or assisting with complex financial decisions—workers can "get closer to their aspired identities" if the AI removes obstacles to doing so, for example by reducing the risk of injury or error, Selenko and colleagues explained.

And when AI generates new tasks, such as requiring workers to use algorithmic outputs, those workers are more likely to experience "identity expansion" and adjust to the changes "if liminal spaces are created for people to engage in learning and in identity restructuring," the researchers wrote.

In any of these scenarios, employers should be mindful of how the changes might recompose teams and organizational hierarchies or even "shift the norms of what constitutes esteemed, desirable, and knowledgeable behavior in the eyes of other people," according to Selenko and colleagues. They added that more research is needed into where, when, and by whom AI-related changes are most likely to be assessed negatively, and how employers can provide constructive narratives and appropriate training to support their workers' successful integration into this brave new world of work.

Feedback on this article? Email apsobserver@psychologicalscience.org ***or login to comment.***

Reference: Selenko, E., Bankins, S., Shoss, M., Warburton, J., & Restubog, S. L. D. (2022). Artificial intelligence and the future of work: A functional-identity perspective. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *31*(3), 272–279. https://doi.org/10.1177/09637214221091823