



“Skynet” is Coming...for my job!

I can see it now, society implodes not because “Skynet” took over, but because it took all our jobs. As far as a movie plot goes, that one is not a blockbuster, but the idea certainly has people riled up. I worry when I see people arguing either side of that debate to its extreme, so I thought I should take a shot at presenting a balanced perspective.

Let’s start by acknowledging some harsh realities. Research shows that 7 out of 10 people report anxiety about AI affecting their work. Researchers have even given this a name... “algorithmic anxiety.” That sucks. The news is full of stories about overnight job loss blamed on AI. That sucks too. Such layoffs are often followed by admissions that AI was not the real reason and in some cases, the organizations started rehiring not long after the dismissals. Interestingly, it has been suggested that the media attention these types of layoffs get may grossly overestimate the actual scale of the issue. That said, these things have and will continue to happen.

Now, let’s look at human nature. First of all, our brains are wired for survival, not happiness and not success. That is just basic biology. It kept us alive when sabre toothed tabby cats were trying to gobble us up, but that wiring makes it hard for us to look at the big picture. In fact, scientists have estimated that as much as 95% of our decisions are actually driven subconsciously and then we rationalize how we made that decision after the fact. I would love to say I am exempt from that rule, but I am convinced they got that right.

Next, society has a very long and very established pattern of adapting to new technology, but usually in a rather backwards way. Did you know that the first intended uses of the telephone and television closely mimicked the uses of the radio, until people figured out more effective ways to use them better suited to their design. I can’t imagine using the telephone to listen to a concert, but that was one of the original plans. After some creative thinking, better uses became obvious. That pattern is showing up in AI every day now.

If we are being thorough, we must consider the risks of AI to our lives and livelihoods. For example I can only imagine how lives changed when humans harnessed fire, but we are still alive. Yes, we sometimes burn ourselves and even lose homes and people to the power of the flame, but we have fire resistant materials and fire departments and burn treatments. There are a few living souls that can recall how the internal combustion engine altered lives. Those little rascals are tied to countless injuries and deaths themselves, not including issues related to smog and lead poisoning. We still co-exist. As a young boy, we all worried that we would be wiped out by an atomic bomb, we even practiced drills in class to prepare ourselves. The possibility is still very real, but nobody seems worried about it these days. Many of us remember existence before the Internet and lived through the fear of December 31, 1999 when the world

was going to shutdown due to Y2K programming issues. Each of these technologies posed some version of threat to humanity and the status quo and each time people declared, “this time is different” and the end was nigh. It is impossible to deny that the pace of change is advancing at an exponential rate, so when people say this time is different, they are not wrong. Yes, terrorists might figure out how to use AI to weaponize a virus, at least they did in a movie I watched the other night. Yes, a hacker could figure out how to use AI to shut down the power grid. Heck, a guy with a tinfoil hat was telling me AI will cause the magnetic poles to flip next year. The good news is that AI gives us the tools to counter those threats too. So can we confirm 100% whether or not AI will take us out? The honest answer is, no.

The risk of AI is a matter of probability and degree. Who knows how to calculate those odds? Nobody. The sheer number of interactions involved is staggering, making it even impossible for even AI to come close to offering a clearcut answer. I think we can all agree that self improving AI will outsmart us in numerous ways in the near future, and that autonomous machines will be everywhere. So what does that really mean for our jobs?

Let’s think about this with the big picture in mind. We can agree that necessity drives innovation and adapting to AI is and will be a necessity. So how will we adapt? The signs are already showing up. The same patterns show up every time technology kicks us out of complacency.

We tend to do a few things:

- 1) Some of us react strongly
 - a) Plenty of people certainly love and/or hate AI and let it feed their “confirmation bias”
 - i) Fear driven behaviour tends to burn itself out and apathy gives way
 - ii) Unjustified optimism dulls overtime
- 2) Some of us try to ignore it
 - a) It can be easier to just carry on as usual
 - i) Eventually these people let themselves be pulled along with the rest of society
- 3) Some of us become engrossed with the new
 - a) A few eager personalities chase after every scrap of information they can find and spread the word among their zones of influence
 - i) These are the people to watch and listen to, especially the ones who look at all sides of the issue.

Through all of these behaviour patterns, social norms shift. Shifts tend to start in grass roots groups, then the ideas spread and those social norms diffuse throughout society, until we find a new normal. If we can read how social norms are shifting, we can see how things are likely to stabilize. Luckily, we now have easy access to a stunning amount of information about shifting social norms. The real challenge is managing our own confirmation bias, something that the media and internet feed aggressively. So, if you really want to predict what will happen, you need to become the one that looks at an issue from all sides, or at least learn to listen to those who do.

This brings us back to the question about what will happen to our jobs. We know that rapid change is the new norm. We know that society generally follows the path of least resistance as dictated by our subconscious fear driven brains. We know that human society adapts to all change at the speed of diffusing social norms. We know that our global connectivity makes it possible for social norms to spread incredibly fast once we reach a tipping point. We just have to predict what those norms will mean for the job market.

Consider this, AI is a tool and humans are the most adept tool users on the planet. We are also very competitive with each other. Combine that with the reality that our fear of things also diminishes over time. This means that AI will slowly recede from being the “new atomic bomb” and our desire for gain will direct our thinking. Now, when we see one of our peers use a tool in a new way and getting a benefit we don’t have, we want it too. As well, fear of job loss will recede as AI becomes normal in the workplace. Interestingly, fear of loss will also drive people towards AI as they sense that their job is at risk if they don’t learn it. More and more people will add to their AI skills and knowledge as they see the benefits their coworkers get from exploring it. Then the desire for gain will drive people to increase their AI skill to advance their careers or just to simplify some of the drudgery their job includes. Another trend we must consider is the move by AI and tech companies to simplify and integrate smoothly into our lives. So, even if we don’t try to add AI into our work and personal life, it slowly migrates in.

Now, AI is naturally part of our life, but what does it mean for my job? For starters, you have already been partially reskilled just by participating in daily social life. Social norms and competitive pressure have brought AI into everything you do, every service you use, every product you buy. Often we just accept the new efficiencies and even expect them. We don’t care if the benefits were AI driven, we just feel entitled to them. Before we know it, we expect AI to be part of the job and part of our lives.

Of course, employers will have their own ideas about how to bring AI into the workplace as they see the need to stay competitive or risk going out of business. Smart organizations will involve employees in the shift. Sadly, there are countless reports where workers describe feeling blindsided by automation decisions, betrayed by employers who promised job security, and increasingly uncertain about the sustainability of any career path. If you don’t have a smart employer, be the one that helps them make a good decision. I don’t mean just complaining, but consider pointing out part of the job that would do well with a little AI support. Help decision makers see the gaps that AI could fill. Be part of the solution and your job becomes more secure and hopefully even easier. This is perhaps the most important part of the question about what happens to YOUR job. What are you open to exploring about AI and your job?

Human psychology and systems thinking shows us the patterns, but they cannot predict every specific situation. The patterns strongly suggest that workforces will adapt, employees will be reskilled and organizations will integrate new approaches, probably mimicking the old approaches at first, but then evolving. Those AI driven projects will almost never fully work... at first, maybe not ever. No atomic bomb moment, just progressive shifting, sometimes

uncomfortable, sometimes exciting. That said, some people and organizations will be too stuck to shift and closures and layoffs will happen.

This is where human agency comes in. If we get caught in a collision of changing forces, we can adapt or sink. Most of us will adapt out of necessity. Call it Darwinian, call it common sense, it is all the same. You can complain about it, but that won't change much, except to make people tune you out. Sure, we are all susceptible to change fatigue and that can drop our job engagement and morale, but that in itself is a framing issue. Choose to view it as an opportunity and it will be. Obviously, some jobs will disappear, ideally the ones nobody wants, but this is not new. Imagine yourself enjoying the exploration of a new field while collecting new skills. I know that brings a smile to my face nearly every day.

So why fret about coming change when we can prepare and even embrace it. Do you see "Skynet" coming? If so, start building your own fleet of tools and strategies. When others see your collection of tools and skills, you become the thought leader, you become a tool of social diffusion, you become the next "John Connor" of AI. Just don't expect your own soundtrack... unless you make it yourself.



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