



Are we sacrificing the future of the human workforce for short-term corporate gain?

By Kerry Hallard, CEO of the GSA UK

Unless you've been keeping Rip Van Winkle company under a nearby tree recently, you won't have escaped the hype surrounding robotic process automation and the much-prophesised Doomsday scenario where the jobs of 15 million Britons (nearly half of the UK's 31.8 million workforce) will eventually be wiped out, taken over by machines. Whether you believe the headlines or not (the statistic mentioned above was actually volunteered by Mark Carney, Governor of the Bank of England), there is no doubt that as automation in general - and robotic process automation (RPA) specifically - starts to scale, entire white-collar professions will become endangered, with the lower income professions most likely to be hardest hit.

Of course, the benefits of RPA cannot be ignored; high volume transactions processed with greater accuracy and at higher speeds, with less risk of downtime, providing a better customer experience and inevitably, for a lower longer-term cost. It's little wonder then that enterprises are falling over themselves to deploy robotics into their operating models to improve profits and increase shareholder value; that's the nature of business after all, it keeps the wheels of the economy turning and it's why the Government has recently provided a £17 million handout to universities for research into artificial intelligence initiatives including robotics and driverless vehicles.

Except that this is only one part of the equation; as more and more people are displaced by robots it begs the questions 'where do they turn to?', 'what jobs will they do?', 'how do they earn an honest living so as not to be a burden on an already creaking state?'

At the GSA we strongly believe that if the economy is going to truly benefit from such innovations, there needs to be a broader and ongoing discussion on the impact of technologies such as robotic process automation (RPA) and artificial intelligence (AI) on society. The narrative needs to extend beyond purely the commercial benefits achievable and look closely at the human impact in terms of reskilling and redeployment of displaced workforces.

We cannot afford to lose sight of the fact that these technologies will not only significantly impact existing workforces, but recognise the fall-out will impact future generations. Therefore, Government, Business Leaders and Trade Associations must come together and act now, to cohesively apply the learning from previous industrial revolutions and avoid making the same mistakes this time round.

This is why we hosted the world's first national debate on the societal impact of automation at this year's Symposium, with trade unions, buy-side organisations, vendors and industry commentators coming together to discuss the possible consequences for our society. Whilst we hope that the debate itself leads to further industry-wide discussion on the future of work, we are doing much more behind the scenes to influence the industry to act responsibly in realising the benefits of existing and emerging technology without endangering the jobs of whole legions of human professionals. We'll share more details on this, and how you can get involved, in future communications.

