Safety

How Manufacturers Can Adopt AI Without Alarming Workers

Kellie Escoto | Sep 12, 2024

Robots, virtual reality, self-driving cars, artificial intelligence: Advanced technologies that were once the stuff of science fiction movies are quickly becoming facts of life—and invaluable tools—for American industry.

In fact, a *Forbes Advisor survey* found that 97 percent of business owners believe that adopting AI, a comparatively newer but rapidly evolving tool, will yield at least one positive effect for their companies.

Their workforces are somewhat less enthusiastic.

The *American Psychological Association* says 2 in 5 U.S. workers worry that AI might eventually make their jobs obsolete, and two-thirds feel stressed or tense because of it during the workday. Those concerns aren't totally off base.

According to a *McKinsey report*, 30 percent of hours worked could be automated by 2030.

Can AI reduce workplace stress?

While some data indicates that AI in the workplace can increase stress, *a study of manufacturing workers in China* found that 1 in 10 people actually reported better mental health in the wake of automation—specifically lower-skilled workers and those born before 1980.

Why?

Researchers have developed a few theories:

- Lower-skilled workers saw relief from dangerous and dirty jobs, improving their outlook and reducing stress.
- Workers born before 1980 benefited from better work-life balance because automation lessened their responsibilities, allowed for more flexible work hours and gave them more time with family, a growing priority for older employees.

In the manufacturing realm alone, companies have already begun using AI for everything from managing inventories and streamlining supply chains to developing new products and powering robots.

AI's Emotional and Mental Impact

Growing worker concern in response mirrors the reactions of previous generations faced with game-changing technology that eliminated some jobs and dramatically altered others.

Employees worry not only that machines will eventually replace them but that their career growth and earning potential will be curbed in the meantime.

Even those who are already working with AI can feel fatigued by constant changes and steep learning curves. According to *Psychology Today*, workers who are pressured to adapt to new technologies and systems may experience weariness, burnout, anxiety and even depression.

Employees' concerns over AI can hurt their employers, too. If workers feel undervalued, they might become less attached to the work they do and less motivated to do their best.

That may lead to poorer performance, reduced output, increased errors and a drop in overall workplace safety.

And, ultimately, a worker who doesn't feel that he or she is appreciated might choose to leave a job completely, driving up employee turnover and forcing companies to spend extra money recruiting and training replacements.

Given AI's potential benefits, avoiding it isn't the solution to the dilemma.

> **Companies who want to successfully integrate AI while supporting people should be transparent about how they plan to leverage the technology and give their employees the opportunity to get involved with the transition.**

Instead, companies who want to successfully integrate AI should be transparent about how they plan to leverage the technology and give their employees the opportunity to take part. Experts suggest the following steps:

- **Share your plan.** If your company is using AI—or even exploring the possibility—tell employees what your strategy looks like. Be clear about how you believe AI will improve the workplace, as well as any expected benefits or drawbacks for workers. Show them that rather than a hindrance, AI can be a catalyst for career growth.
- **Invite employees to take part.** Consider forming a committee of employees to help with AI decision-making. Invite people to represent each department or role that will be affected by AI adoption so they can speak for their colleagues. This is a great opportunity for workers to bring up questions and concerns, and it also ensures that employers have a well-rounded view of their company's needs before determining how AI can fit in.
- **Take it one step at a time.** While you may be tempted to implement several changes at once, easing into using AI can be better for employees *and* employers. A multipart transition gives workers more time to get used to changes, and you can observe and make any needed adjustments before moving on to the next stage.
- **Empower employees to skill up and grow.** While a *2020 World Economic Forum report* estimated that 85 million jobs would be lost to machines and automation by 2025, it went on to predict that a further 97 million new jobs would crop up to support AI infrastructure. After all, while AI is meant to mimic human cognition, making it work requires human cognition. Offer ongoing education and training opportunities that equip workers with the skills to pivot and adapt to changes that will come with AI.
- **Promote work-life balance.** If employees are feeling stressed, worried or burned out, especially because of concerns over AI and job security, encourage them to take paid time off to recharge. Taking breaks from work can *reduce stress and increase job satisfaction,* so you may find that employees come back after a week off feeling a lot better.

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