

Submission to The Digital Transformation of Workplaces inquiry

There are critical concerns regarding the rapid development and deployment of automated decision-making and AI technologies in Australian workplaces. The topics discussed here include the responsibility and accountability issues introduced by automation, the impact of skill degradation, the social implications of job displacement by automation, the need to safeguard certain roles from automation, and the complexities introduced by generative AI technologies.

1. The Moral Crumple Zone: Accountability in Automated Systems

The concept of the 'Moral Crumple Zone' highlights a significant risk in the domain of automation: the potential for a misalignment between accountability and responsibility. As automated systems take on more decision-making roles, there is a common risk that human operators will still be held accountable for decisions they have increasingly less control over. This can lead to situations where blame is improperly assigned to human operators who are merely supervising or monitoring these systems. To mitigate this, it is imperative that governance frameworks are adapted to clearly define accountability for decisions made by automated systems, ensuring that responsibility is not unjustly assigned to human supervisors. The introduction of moral crumple zones and improper automation of tasks is a major source of pushback on automation, and thus reduces potential benefits and creates unnecessary ill will.

2. Skill Degradation and Lessons from Aviation

The aviation industry offers a salient lesson in the risks of over-reliance on automation. Studies have shown that as pilots become more dependent on automated flight systems, their manual flying skills can atrophy, potentially leading to increased risk during unexpected or emergency situations. This phenomenon, known as 'skill degradation,' is applicable across various sectors where automation is implemented. Recent research shows this happens with use of Generative AI tools and knowledge work as well. It is essential to maintain a balance between automation and human skill development, ensuring that workers are not only proficient in using automated tools but are also capable of intervening when necessary.

3. Support for Displaced Workers and the Need for Targeted Taxation

The implementation of technologies designed with an 'efficiency mindset' often results in significant job displacement. While the benefits of increased productivity are clear, the social cost to those whose jobs are displaced can be profound. It is crucial to provide substantial support for these individuals. This support could include retraining programs, financial aid, and counseling services. Funding for these initiatives could be sourced from a targeted tax on organizations benefiting most from automation. Such a tax would not only provide necessary funds but also ensure that the financial benefits of automation contribute to the broader social good. While a potential long-term goal is UBI, or better, Universal

Generous Income, the stepping stones leading up to it need not be controversial and must be taken urgently to avoid large societal disruptions.

4. Defining Automation Boundaries: Roles "Off Limits" for Automation

There is an urgent need for societal discussions on roles that should be reserved for humans. This discussion should consider ethical, emotional, and social dimensions, such as roles in caregiving, justice, and other areas where human judgment and empathy are irreplaceable or where people simply do not *want* automation to take over. Establishing clear boundaries for automation will help preserve essential human values and societal norms, as well as decrease uncertainty for select career paths.

5. Generative AI: A Call for Revised Governance and Ethical Frameworks

The emergence of generative AI technologies represents a significant leap from traditional pattern-recognition AI systems. Generative AI can make decisions in ways that are fundamentally different from previous technologies. Current regulatory and ethical frameworks, designed for older AI technologies, are inadequate to address the challenges posed by generative AI. There is an urgent need to develop new governance structures and ethical guidelines that are robust enough to manage the unique capabilities and risks of generative AI systems.

It is paramount that we address these issues thoughtfully and proactively. Arguably we are already too late. By redefining accountability structures, maintaining essential human skills, supporting displaced workers, setting boundaries for automation, and revising our regulatory and ethical frameworks, we can better harness the benefits of these technologies while mitigating their rather serious risks. This more balanced approach will ensure that the development of automation technologies contributes positively to our society, enhancing both productivity and human dignity.

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Transition Level