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Will RFID Help to Enslave Us?

There has been a growing chorus of experts claiming that advancements in artificial intelligence and robotics will make human workers obsolete. The argument goes something like this: Computing power has gotten incredibly inexpensive. At the same time, we are seeing advancements in robotics, machine learning and machine vision that could enable robots to do almost any job humans do today.

In February, I wrote about a December 2013 article in *Wired* magazine titled “Better Than Human: Why Robots Will—And Must—Take Our Jobs.” In that article, author Kevin Kelly argued that we will soon see a wave of robots taking over most jobs that people are doing today. “Yes, dear reader, even you will have your job taken away by machines,” he wrote. “Robot replacement is just a matter of time” (see *The Age of Robots*).



Kelly is hardly alone. Economists Jeffrey D. Sachs and Laurence J. Kotlikoff wrote a paper a year earlier for the U.S. National Bureau of Economic Research, titled “Smart Machines and Long-Term Misery,” claiming machines will replace low-skilled workers and leave people worse off. And two professors at the MIT Sloan School of Management, Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee, wrote a book called *The Second Machine Age: Work, Progress, and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technologies*. While more even-handed than other works, they claim we are in danger of losing the “race against the machine.”

Because RFID enables computers to interact with the real world in a way that has been too expensive or impossible in the past, I have been thinking about its effect on workers for years. RFID technologies will enable robots to differentiate things that look very similar but which are, in fact, different. For example, the technology would make it possible for a robot to help a customer by very quickly picking out the correct pair of jeans from a pile of items that look virtually identical.

RFID has already had some impact on the workforce. I don't

have any statistics, but I am pretty certain fewer people work as toll collectors today than a decade ago, since many transportation agencies worldwide adopted automated toll-collection systems that use RFID technology.

But I have never believed RFID and other technologies spell the end for workers. After all, companies have invested trillions of dollars in IT during the past 50 years, and we employ far more workers than ever before (even if the unemployment rate globally remains way too high). Steve Ratner, a former counselor to the Secretary of the Treasury and the man who led the Obama Administration's successful effort to restructure the automobile industry after the financial collapse of 2008, apparently agrees with me.

Ratner recently wrote an opinion article in *The New York Times* titled "Fear Not the Coming of the Robots." In that article, Ratner pointed out that "Throughout history, aspiring Cassandras have regularly proclaimed that new waves of technological innovation would render huge numbers of workers idle, leading to all manner of economic, social and political disruption."

Ratner cited a few examples, noting that every time, the doomsayers were proven wrong. "But that has not prevented a cascade of shrill new proclamations," he wrote, "that-notwithstanding centuries of history-'this time is different': The technology revolution will impair the livelihoods of millions of Americans."

Without new technologies, Ratner wrote, productivity cannot rise-and if productivity does not rise, wages cannot increase. "That's why, in the sweep of history, the human condition barely improved for centuries," he said, "until the early days of the industrial revolution, when transformational new technologies (the robots of their day) were introduced."

Rising productivity is good. Yes, some jobs are lost in the

process, but more new ones are created. Is it possible to create hundreds of millions of new jobs? History suggests that it is. There was a time when most people worked on farms. It would probably have seemed impossible back then to create enough jobs to employ all the workers that would be replaced by agricultural machines—but that is what happened.

Companies need to evolve. Workers need to learn new skills. And governments need to adjust policies. That's what capitalism is all about. If we are smart about it, workers will wind up with a better standard of living than ever. Does anyone really want to go back to the days before the rise of the machine, when everyone got up at dawn to start doing farm work?

Mark Roberti is the founder and editor of RFID Journal. If you would like to comment on this article, click on the link below. To read more of Mark's opinions, visit the RFID Journal Blog, the Editor's Note archive or RFID Connect.



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