

Devina Mehra: Yes, AI is coming for our jobs; it's the old story of new tech

Devina Mehra | 4 June 2025



'Luddites' is a term used for those opposed to new technology. (istockphoto)

SUMMARY

The worry of job losses caused by artificial intelligence (AI) should not be exaggerated. Any such innovation usually creates new jobs while taking away others. Even the original Luddites would've seen this happen.

"AI is coming for your job." "Estimates are that 40 to 50% of white collar jobs will lose out to AI." So blare headlines from everywhere. Do you know what it reminds me of? The first move towards computerization of Indian banking, which happened back in the 80s, when I was young but not too young to register the protests and strikes by the bank unions and officer associations.

This was an initiative by Manmohan Singh when he was Reserve Bank of India (RBI) governor, and the task force was headed by C. Rangarajan, who also went on to head [RBI](#). The thin edge of the wedge was computerization of cheque clearing, which in earlier days could take weeks, with huge discrepancies and losses. And then, of course, one-by-one other banking operations were computerized.

A large part of what banking personnel used to do prior to this was maintaining records, tallying accounts, updating passbooks, physically dealing with customers, [etc.](#) On a static basis, it would have appeared that the bulk of [banking jobs](#) would disappear. But that is not quite how it has panned out, has it? Not only have banking jobs risen over the years, there have been many new categories of jobs within banking—from managing the digital customer experience to cyber security, besides the challenge of maintaining large integrated systems.

In fact, that is the pattern of the world. Each time a new technology comes, whether it is the printing press or the motor car, the early focus is always on the people who stand to lose their jobs. But usually, the eventual picture looks very different.

For one, while certain skills are no longer needed—those of scribes who used to handwrite manuscripts, for example—there are many other jobs that get created. In addition, technology enhances productivity, bringing down the cost of products and services, which means their demand goes up.

Here is an example from Ha-Joon Chang's *Edible Economics: A Hungry Economist Explains the World*: "According to a study by James Bessen, during the 19th century in the US, automation eliminated 98% of the weaving labour required to produce a yard of cloth, but the number of weavers actually grew by four times, because the demand for cotton cloth, thanks to the lower price, increased so much."

Every technology that brings change makes a certain category of workers redundant but creates jobs elsewhere. Other ways of making a living may arise, or jobs in other locations, but overall employment is typically not hurt as much as anticipated (or not at all).

‘Luddites’ is a term used for those opposed to new technology. Its origin is traceable to 19th century workers in English cloth mills who opposed new machines and even took to destroying them to save their jobs. Ultimately, they were suppressed through force and the term came into usage as a derogatory expression for those who seek to hold back the world from progress.

As Chang points out, automation has been with us for over 250 years, but it never resulted in the mass destruction of jobs on the scale predicted. Closer to our time, the business of most travel agencies has dwindled as we aggressively look for flights and deals online. But there has been a whole category of new businesses that have cropped up around the travel industry— from flight and hotel booking sites to platforms like Airbnb that have made individual home owners into part-time hoteliers, not to mention those with highly specialized travel offerings that became viable only because of the reach of the internet.

[Zomato](#), Swiggy, Uber, Blinkit, Ola and many others have again created categories with employment of one kind or another that did not exist a few years ago. The security guard industry has also blossomed and multiplied only in the last two decades.

In James Herriot’s books set in rural England of the 1930s, he talks about men who had grown up looking after large horses used for agricultural work re-skilling themselves to be agricultural machine operators and tractor drivers.

There is another aspect to the panic around AI. While we can sneer at factory workers holding off automation and not allowing new machinery, this time around, the technology being talked about is impacting white collar professions like finance, teaching, medicine, law and even the media. So there is a bit of a class aspect to this, where you may feel that your own job or skill should be safe from redundancy.

We may think that this time it is different. But the fact is that most technological progress is unexpected till it actually happens. Around 1850, every fourth employed woman in the UK was in domestic service. Now that number would be microscopic because along came washing machines, refrigerators, microwaves and vacuum cleaners.

Even manufacturing has transformed with its processes being not just automated, but even controlled by sophisticated computers and machines.

The march of technology is relentless and the only way to move forward is to relearn and acquire skills that will be needed wherever future jobs are. That is the way it has been—at least since the Industrial Revolution. And it does not appear as if this will change in the Information Revolution.

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