

Presidential Candidates: Why Is Automation's Job Destruction Not Being Debated?

The workplace revolution via smart machines means immigration must be substantially reduced

By **BRENDA WALKER**

Why are the Presidential candidates not debating the topic that is already fundamentally changing the American workplace and therefore the economy—automation?

As of this writing, the word “automation” has been uttered only once during a Presidential debate: during the November 10, 2015, Republican Presidential powwow, Senator Marco Rubio answered a question about the minimum wage by saying it would “make people more expensive than a machine, and that means all this automation...is only going to be accelerated.” That mention is a tiny notice of a very important issue. The predictions from experts are sobering: Oxford University researchers forecast in 2013 that 47 percent of U.S. jobs were at risk for automation within 20 years. A well-known technical consulting firm had a prediction for the next 10 years: “Gartner predicts one in three jobs will be converted to software, robots, and smart machines by 2025,” opined the company’s research director Peter Sondergaard.

The latter forecast was reported by the PBS *NewsHour* in October 2014, so the item was not buried in a trade journal but was broadcast on a popular television news show.

In early 2013 the Associated Press did a series of three articles about the recession’s aftermath. The first was titled, “Middle-Class Jobs Cut in Recession Feared Gone for Good, Lost to Technology.” It began, “Five years after the start of the Great Recession, the toll is terrifyingly clear: Millions of middle-class jobs have been lost in developed countries the world over.”

That’s clear enough.

Doesn’t everyone in Washington watch *Sixty Minutes*, the CBS show that has broken some important political stories? In January of 2013, it presented a piece titled, “Are robots hurting job growth?” where the topic

was investigated and experts on automation were interviewed:

Andrew McAfee: Our economy is bigger than it was before the start of the Great Recession. Corporate profits are back. Business investment in hardware and software is back higher than it’s ever been. What’s not back is the jobs.

Reporter Steve Kroft: And you think technology and increased automation is a factor in that?

Erik Brynjolfsson: Absolutely.

Steve Kroft narrating video: The percentage of Americans with jobs is at a 20-year low. Just a few years ago if you traveled by air you would have interacted with a human ticket agent. Today, those jobs are being replaced by robotic kiosks. Bank tellers have given way to ATMs, sales clerks are surrendering to e-commerce and switchboard operators, and secretaries to voice recognition technology. Erik Brynjolfsson: There are lots of examples of routine, middle-skilled jobs that involve relatively structured tasks and those are the jobs that are being eliminated the fastest. Those kinds of jobs are easier for our friends in the artificial intelligence community to design robots to handle them. They could be software robots, they could be physical robots.

The knowledge about automation and its effects has been mainstream for a while, but political leaders haven’t been paying attention.

The Presidential candidates and Washington as a whole are sleeping through an economic earthquake caused by automation that is poised to completely upend the basis of our capitalist system. Technological unemployment shreds the social contract of business giving wages to workers in return for jobs performed. Now machines can accomplish the same tasks that humans have done for ages, from accounting to agriculture.

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CBS News had a sobering report for Labor Day about technological unemployment. NYU Professor Gary Marcus remarked, “Eventually I think most jobs will be replaced, like 75 or 80 percent of the people are not going to work for a living.” He didn’t specify a timeline, but it isn’t too soon to consider how such a sweeping shift of society’s economic underpinnings might be managed.

So how is the economy supposed to function when the majority of workers have become obsolete? Isn’t that a vital question for political leaders to consider? Experts in the smart-machines field forecast a fundamental transformation of how the workplace will function, although their prescriptions have been slim. Martin Ford, the author of “Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future,” believes that eventually the government will have to provide everyone with a basic income.

There is no excuse for Presidential candidates to be ignorant of the looming threat. In fact, technological unemployment is happening now, and has affected the disappointing recovery from the recession.

One problem is the stubbornness of politics to adjust to the new reality because the narrative will have to change. The political camps of left and right have stuck to their traditional positions regarding the nation’s vexing unemployment problem. The liberals demand a higher minimum wage (which often causes employers to switch more rapidly to automation) and the conservatives argue that less government regulation will expand employment. Reduced regulation would likely free up job creation, but it doesn’t address the underlying cause of technological unemployment. Meanwhile, 93 million Americans are not working and labor participation is at a record low level, so it’s reasonable to think the jobs universe has shrunk at least partially because of automation.

And mass immigration continues on auto-pilot. The first response to technology’s threat to jobs should be a basic re-evaluation of America’s need for immigrant workers. Big immigration enthusiast Speaker Paul Ryan has pushed the idea of the generational retirement of boomers as a reason to increase the number of foreign workers.

REP. PAUL RYAN (R-WIS.): Not now, but in the future we’re going to have labor shortages. We have 10,000 people retiring each and every day in America when the Baby Boomers retire. We are not like Europe, we’re not like Japan in that our birthrates are really low, but they’re not high enough.

Immigration, in a decade or so, can help us. That means we need to get an immigration system that works. We need an immigration system that works to bring people to this country who want to contribute. (The Laura Ingraham Show, June 19, 2013)

The looming age of automation means that replacing boomers with immigrants is a wrong, even dangerous idea, based on workplace assumptions that are disappearing—like humans will do the jobs. Obviously, the advent of smart machines means that immigration must be substantially reduced. They are not needed. Some will turn to crime because of insufficient jobs. Excess immigrants will add to a growing underclass that is angry and disruptive.

Conservatives may not understand Bernie Sanders’ popularity among voters, including his open espousal of socialism. In fact, capitalism has not been working very well for average Americans in recent years. Real wages have remained stagnant since the seventies, and the middle class continues to shrink. Of course, even “democratic” socialism as proposed by Sanders barely limps along in Scandinavia.

In the minds of many people these days, capitalism means the global economy forced upon us by the elites in the form of immigration and outsourcing, the negative effects of which have been accumulating over decades. Jobs that couldn’t be shipped overseas to cheap wage havens have been given to immigrant and illegal alien workers who accept working for peanuts. And now there is technological unemployment. As a result, the rich have done very well under the globalization system they demanded.

There are broad areas of society harmed by systemic joblessness already, like urban areas where the future looks hopeless. The young black people in Ferguson, Missouri, complained about police misbehavior, but all kinds of trouble can happen when there are no jobs to keep the young constructively occupied making money. Perhaps some of the grandparents of the angry demonstrators worked at nearby automotive factories in the St. Louis area that have closed. Certainly unemployment is a worsening problem in many cities for the young and poor, and automation piles on the existing conditions caused by outsourcing and excessive immigration.

Perhaps aspiring Presidents haven’t debated automation because there is no easy solution, and certainly not a conservative one. Nevertheless, the automated future is now upon us and must be a part of political debate. ■