

Will your job survive the robot revolution? Oregon leaders get dire warning about future

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Futurist Steve Brown gives a presentation about automation and the future of jobs during the Oregon Business Plan's annual leadership summit at the Oregon Convention Center on Monday, Dec. 4, 2017. (Photo: Steve Benham/KATU.com Staff)

PORTLAND, Ore. — The robot revolution is about to explode, potentially automating thousands of jobs in the state and putting a large number of people out of work.

So it's time to act now. It's time to plan for the future. It's time to start a conversation. That was the message Monday conveyed to Oregon business and government leaders during the Oregon Business Plan's annual leadership summit at the Oregon Convention Center.

"Twenty years from now, a giant tsunami of automation will have hit Oregon and half of the jobs will be destroyed," futurist Steve Brown, formerly of Intel, told the crowd.

And he had numerous videos and slides to prove the point.

Virtually no job will be untouched by the revolution. Robots will clean floors in stores, lay bricks for buildings, keep crops weed free, harvest those crops, flip burgers, cook gourmet meals, and even act as lifeguards. Not to mention self-driving cars and trucks and passenger drones.

All of it will have the potential to severely disrupt the economy of Oregon as we know it today. And, Brown said, the automation tsunami will affect both white collar and blue collar jobs.

A takeaway: The more predictable your job is, the higher the risk that it could be automated.

A report last week released by a coalition led by the Portland Business Alliance found that over 144,000 jobs in Oregon are at risk of automation.

The report also highlighted the communities most at risk: Rural areas, especially the region along the southern Oregon coast. Almost 60 percent of jobs there are at risk of being taken over by machines. But no region in Oregon will remain unaffected in the near future.

Also last week, the McKinsey Global Institute released its own report, finding that globally about 50 percent of the work done today by humans could be done by a robot. And the report found that technology will be a major disruption worldwide by 2030, potentially displacing between 400 million and 800 million workers -- workers who will need to find new jobs.

While the situation appears dire, John Tapogna, president of ECONorthwest, who worked on Oregon's report and was a panelist at the summit, outlined the view of economists who are a little bit more optimistic about the future. Those economists point out that technology can complement human labor and create new opportunities.

For example, even with the advent of ATMs, bank tellers still exist.

"We got rid of the cash-handling jobs ... and turned (tellers) into relationship managers," Tapogna said.

He said Oregon can be better prepared for the future by continuing to be innovators, building more housing, graduating more students from high school and college and reinventing the safety net, which was developed in a world that was far less volatile.

Still, there is an indicator that will alert the state that it's in trouble.

"If we end up in the course of the next 15 to 20 years with a quarter to 30 percent of prime-age adults not working, that's going to be a huge problem," Tapogna said. "And that's the problem that's in front of us now."

The ultimate fear for many is that capitalism is in for a rude awakening in the not-too-distant future. As more and more people lose their jobs to automation, there will be fewer and fewer consumers to buy products.

Brown, the futurist, says many things will need to be reimagined, including capitalism.

"What does that look like? ... To me that's the central question, what does Capitalism 2.0 look like?" he said.

Another aspect of life that will need to be reimagined is education.

"The era of one degree, one career is over," Brown said. "We need lifelong learning. That means the universities need to plan to have a lifelong relationship. The schools, the community colleges -- this is about a lifelong relationship with their customers, because we need to give people robot-proof skills."

Policy and Government's Role

While speakers and panelists alluded to and spoke briefly on the government's role in an automated economy and the restructuring of the social safety net, no one really delved into the policy debate, which Brown said needs to happen.

Martin Ford, a futurist and software developer in Silicon Valley, who was not a participant at the summit, paints a rather bleak future in his 2015 book "Rise of The Robots: Technology and the threat of a jobless future."

Education and training may not be enough, he says. Technology may cause so much job displacement in the future that some kind of basic income guarantee may be needed.

Contrary to the belief that such a policy would be some sort of socialism, he argues that such a policy would be "fundamentally a market-oriented approach" that would allow people who have lost their jobs or have had their wages severely cut an opportunity to still participate in the market and buy things.

He acknowledges that under such a system there will still need to be incentives for people to work when they can, and that it does come with risks. But he envisions a system that will allow people who do want to work to achieve higher wages and more opportunities than those who don't. He notes that even the unproductive person will still be able to participate in the market.

He says such a system would be paid for because many state and federal anti-poverty programs would be eliminated or used less. Different kinds of taxes may also be necessary, including a carbon tax that would raise money but also help reduce greenhouse gases.