



We hear a lot of scare stories about automation, particularly when it comes to the workplace. Barely a week goes by without someone claiming we're all going to be replaced by robots, with automation making us redundant by the millions. It's easy to see why we – as employees and as businesses – would panic.

But, in truth, artificial intelligence (AI) in the workplace is more of a nuanced topic.

“AI tends to suffer from quite a polarised narrative,” says Rob McCargow, director of AI at PwC, a professional services consultancy. “On the one hand, it has been somewhat overhyped in recent years as a magical technology, which overstates its current level of maturity. On the other hand, the dystopian view of AI receives much more traction than it deserves.”

McCargow admits that there are some “very genuine concerns about the negative impact that AI” could have on society, but he's keen to stress that by focusing on dystopian scenarios we risk missing the positive

benefits that it could bring.

What economists disagree on, though, is how many new jobs will be created to replace those that are going to be lost. A recent report by the World Economic Forum suggested that while robots will displace 75m jobs globally in the next 10 years, 133m new jobs could be created because of automation.

Similarly, the McKinsey Global Institute reckons that although between 400m and 800m jobs are at risk, advances in AI and automation could transform our working lives, creating new roles and freeing people up to fill them.

“[Automation] makes businesses more productive,” McCargow says. His view is that it frees up employees to work on more complex tasks.

Time-intensive, repetitive or dull jobs – such as data-entry and expense reports – can easily be automated, leaving human employees more time to attend to matters that require insight, creativity or imagination.

There are a number of things the private sector can do to prepare for the change, too.

“Business leaders need to take action now to help their employees reskill for the new roles of the future,” McCargow says. “Change is already happening, so planning for the effects isn’t something that can be delayed. Approaching automation in the right way for your workforce is all about preparation – understanding which tasks might be affected, and

proactively helping to redesign roles to make the best use of technology and people's skills. In many fields, AI will augment rather than automate human work, so being clear and open with your workforce about the difference is essential.”

On the ground, this preparation takes a number of forms: training staff in new automated systems, giving them additional training to cope with changing roles, and educating them in the ways that automation will affect the workforce. Being proactive is key. This should, McCargow believes, make automation easier both for employees and for businesses themselves.

Clearly, automation is going to have a major impact on economies and workforces. But it's up to us – as individuals, companies and nations – to ensure the transition is carried out with people, not just profits, in mind.