



Jobs disappear not because of robots but because of customers

Common belief these days is that technology is becoming so intelligent that it is replacing smart employees. I think jobs are disappearing because they are outsourced to smart customers. What is left is dumb routine jobs, and robots have always been good at doing that.

I remember when I was a student I used to eat my lunch at the university cafeteria. Back in the 90's I did not need to clean up after finishing my lunch. I just stood up and left. In those times there were employees doing the cleaning after me. It was included in the price of the food. Now, in the company where I work, when I am finished eating my lunch in the cafeteria I have to not only take the tray back to the dirty dishes counter, I also have to carefully place all the dishes in the right shelves. There are even written instructions telling me where to put glasses and mugs. I as a customer am doing a job that belonged to a cafeteria (ex-)employee in the 90's. There are no robots involved, and the food is not any better or cheaper.

If you dig deeper, this is something that happens everywhere and all the time. We customers spend several hours each day doing jobs that were done by yesterday's employees. We even love it! The reason we love it is that companies are not only outsourcing dumb routine jobs to customers -like sorting dirty dishes during your lunch break. They are mainly outsourcing smart and creative jobs, jobs that used to be done by highly paid employees. Think of the hundreds of millions of customers who create creative and artistic content for Facebook and Instagram, several hours each day. Think of the millions of us who try to formulate smart literary sentences using 140 characters to help Twitter curate an attractive feed -and earn money. These companies would not have existed if not because of smart customers working hard to earn money for them.

We have actually gone so far that marketing people are not anymore asking "what can our company do for you?" They are asking "what can our customers do for you?" How can our customers provide value to you based on their life experience, expertise and creativity, without being paid?

So what about robots? Well, robots are as dumb as they have always been. But they are now utilized in intelligent ways by companies -and customers. Take IKEA's kitchen planner as an example ("All you need to do is choose your style and insert your measurements"). As a customer I can plan and design my dream kitchen all by myself. It is a fun task. I can spend hours doing and redoing it. When I am done I can click on

a “Finish” button that starts the boring part. The kitchen planner then sends a message to the robots in the warehouse, telling them what I have ordered. It happens to be that, while I was designing my kitchen, I was –in the background –programming an army of dumb robots to do dumb and boring stuff for me. Since robots are now connected to the internet, as soon as I push the finish button they start their job. Mr. Kamprad can now help his employees –the creative kitchen planners included –to find new opportunities elsewhere.

Algorithms seem to be as dumb as robots, or even dumber. I witness their stupidity every time I log into Facebook. Facebook is the company that can claim to know one thing or two about algorithms. Their algorithms try as hard as they can to guess my interests and fill up my feed with content. Unfortunately, the content they find is always so irrelevant that sometimes I wonder if Facebook would be better off –and I positively surprised –if they used some random URL generator instead. The only interesting content I find there is content that my friends, who happen to be Facebook customers, generate to share with me. Facebook’s robots seem to be so stupid that Russian robots can beat them without Facebook even knowing it. The Facebook example shows how stupid robots are, and will probably stay as such for many years to come. We should give only stupid jobs to robots.

Outsourcing smart jobs to customers is not all too bad. Many times I spend less time “self-serving” myself on a web page than calling a call center. For instance, my surname is impossible for others to spell. I therefore prefer to write it myself in a web-based form than spelling it to a human call center operator. The problem arises when we get blind to the limitations, and think “customer value creation” or automation are the silver bullet solution to complex societal challenges such as global healthcare burden. My friend on Facebook can be very artistic and share appealing photographs of his breakfast. But when I get sick, I somehow want to see not my Facebook friend –and not a robot –but a doctor. And preferably one who is employed at a hospital.

As a company owner, it is easier to blame a robot than admit that you outsourced the job to your customers without paying them. After all, I did not make the robot, it was a Chinese company!
