

Employee automation - advice to employers

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What is 'employee automation'?

Prior to the pandemic, there were often Chinese whispers about how some jobs might be replaced by robots and AI, and for most that seemed more like science fiction than a reality. According to a study carried out by PwC, almost 40% of workers believe their jobs will be obsolete in five years.

However, this view has probably changed a lot for most, as now for many a normal day will involve using technology platforms all day in order to do their work.

There is no doubt that the use of AI in the workplace can assist employees. Take the often-monotonous task of discovery arising from litigation. This was once, and in some instances still is, a very labour-intensive task, but now with the help of AI and technology a lot of the heavy lifting has gone. For anyone working in the legal space, this is a welcome development. However, for some the use of AI in the employment world is not always good news. In the pandemic we have been forced to get more familiar with technology than we ever thought we would have, in order to be able to communicate with clients, work colleagues and family and there is no doubt that some people struggle more than others with this quick pace of change in technology, and how the world operates.

Effects of the pandemic

The pandemic has certainly taught us all how to work and live in a different way and shown many that the traditional 5 days at the workplace going to face to face meetings is gone. Many will find it hard to imagine going back to the traditional 5 days a week in the office with the lengthy commute and no Zoom/ Teams video calls every day. So what does the future hold?

A big challenge with working from home is the impact it has had on training and upskilling the workforce, so some organisations have looked to technology to resource the gaps.

When employees hear of robots coming into the workplace, it brings an air of panic. However, that

is not always the case and employers need to get ahead of this view that AI in the workforce is all bad news for staff. AI can be good news, for most, once it is handled and adopted correctly in the workforce. For example, I have listed a few common threads to consider, and how to get ahead of them:

- Redundancy - there is no doubt that redundancy is a possibility with the introduction of AI and employee automation. However, just because an employee's role itself is redundant, that is not to say the employee couldn't be upskilled in order to manage the AI or indeed work elsewhere within the organisation. Think before you react.
- Training - training and upskilling your workforce is ongoing and necessary. This is not an area to be shied away from merely because many people are working remotely. A lack of training can lead the workforce to feeling demotivated and under-appreciated.
- Education - educate staff on what the new technology will do within the organisation and how it will help them. Knowledge is power, and if employees are not kept informed rumours start, which will in turn lead to a demotivated workplace.
- Role assistance - in certain roles, the use of technology or AI may actually assist the employee's workload and reduce either (or both) the physical or mentally demanding nature of the role.
- Right to Disconnect and Employee Wellness - AI can also bring good news to the workforce and help management / HR deal with tasks that were once very labour intensive. For example, technology can provide automated check ins with staff reminding them to take a break, go for a walk and even stop working for the day. A big concern these days in the remote world of working is how do you manage an employee's hours and ensure they are not on the way to burn out. While no employer is expected to monitor every employee by the hour, this simple use of technology can help remind employees to take a break and switch off, which is the very ethos of the new Code of Conduct on the Right to Disconnect.
- Discrimination - this comes in many different forms and can arise sometimes without an employer consciously being aware of their actions. Make sure all staff are given the same access to training, promotions and jobs within the workforce. There are also studies to say that the use of AI can, in certain instances, be discriminatory to certain people. So to ensure that employers are not caught by this, checks and balances should be put in place with any new technology being adopted that will change how a specific job is done. For example, trial the technology on a group of people and see what each of their reactions and experiences are to the technology.

In short, employers and employees should not be afraid of AI being embedded in our workplace. While there are some issues that need to be managed and monitored, the introduction of AI will not only benefit employers by ensuring a more efficient workplace, but it can also benefit staff from an employee wellness perspective.

For more advice on employment automation, please contact Bláthnaid at blathnaid.evans@ogier.com

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