

Transcript - David Baker- Will robots steal our jobs?

🕒 Thu, 04/25 17:58PM · 45mins

Transcript

Ross D 00:07

Hello, you're listening to the Future Talent Learning Podcast developed to help you build your leadership and management skills. I'm Ross Dickey.

Ross G 00:13

I'm Ross Garner.

Ross D 00:14

This week we're asking, will robots steal our jobs? What is a robot? Can they possibly podcast? Is it possible for robots to replace leaders and managers? To answer these questions, we're speaking to writer, broadcaster, speaker, and coach David Baker.

Ross D 00:28

David worked for 12 years at Financial Times, was managing editor of Wired magazine, and regularly presents on BBC Radio 4 and the World Service. He also teaches at the School of Life. Hi David, how's it going?

David 00:40

I'm good. Good to meet you Ross and you Ross. What a pleasure to be on the podcast. Thanks for asking me.

Ross D 00:45

It is great to have you here. So David, just to get us started, what do we actually mean? Maybe let's start by defining our terms, so talk about robots, AI, automation, what do all of these things mean?

David 00:58

Well, let's start with the biggest topic, shall we? The biggest question. Hard to pin these down. I think by a robot, I think what I mean by robot is any machine that helps us do things better than we might be able to do them by ourselves.

David 01:14

So, you know, back in the day, at the first industrial revolution, you know, around about the 1800s, we saw lots of machines being invented, especially textile manufacturing, for example, which were more productive, which worked 24 hours a day, which were faster, which were cheaper, and which really, you know, motored the industrial revolution.

David 01:34

And we got the hang of the idea that there was something mechanical which could really increase our productivity and make work more lucrative to be crude for the owners of those machines. And so in one sense, this is what robots are still doing now.

David 01:49

But of course, we also have this sort of science fiction idea of a robot as some sort of automaton, which has a sort of way of thinking itself, and which, in most robot stories in science fiction, starts off as a useful servant, but ends up being some sort of terrifying monster that we're either running away from or having to try and destroy.

David 02:12

And what's interesting nowadays is I think those two ideas have met, that actually we've got some fantastic machines which do fantastic things. I'm sure we'll explore these in this conversation. And we've also got this sort of terrifying fear that these amazingly useful machines are, to put it crudely, going to take over the world and probably put us, humans, out of business or even out of existence.

David 02:39

And that's why this is such a fascinating topic now.

Ross G 02:43

On the robot point, just before we go on. So I think that the key feature, I think, of the way that you were describing robots is that they were running independent of human input. So the machines that you're describing, going right back to the Industrial Revolution, are running 24 hours.

Ross G 02:59

It's not necessary that someone's there at the controls. And that possibly feeds into the concern about humans no longer being required, or certainly not in the current large numbers.

David 03:12

And I think when we think about jobs, one of the worries is that these machines, not only because they're faster and more powerful, but also because they work 24 hours a day and they don't need pizza when they're late at the office.

Ross D 03:24

Great and unionised.

David 03:27

They don't unionise, you know, they don't, they don't have days off sick. They don't have to be away at the weekend, you know, all these sort of things. They're just sort of, sort of amazing workers who just keep on going, keep on going, keep on going.

David 03:39

And that's a terrifying competition for us humans, because at the very least we need to go to sleep at some point. And I think that's why people are very worried about, you know, machinery taking their job, because from a kind of bald economic factory owner point of view, machines are a lot better deal than most human beings.

Ross G 03:58

But they don't get better, the kind of typical robot that we're talking about, which maybe segues us nicely to be talking about artificial intelligence.

David 04:09

Absolutely. I mean, this is why this fear has arisen again because of AI, artificial intelligence. To put it crudely, artificial intelligence is the ability of a computer to learn by doing or learn by observing and to change the way it does something from the way it learns, from the way it interacts with its environment.

David 04:33

So AI is often called something like machine learning or pattern recognition, they're all kind of the same thing, is the ability of a computer which has only really appeared to be crude in the last five or ten years or so, to take on board a huge amount of information almost continually and almost continually to update the way it does something, to get better and better and better at it.

David 04:57

And this is where the real threat to jobs is because actually it's coming into an area where usually we humans rule the roost. A good example for me is actually something like Google Translate. I mean, not so long ago, certainly in my working life, being a translator was, you know, a pretty lucrative job.

David 05:15

If you wanted a document translated or a book or whatever, you went to a translator and it took a long time for them to translate it, you paid them quite a lot of money and you had your edition of your document in French or Italian or German or Japanese or whatever.

David 05:32

Now, as we know, we can go to Google Translate and put our document in and a pretty good translation comes out of it. It's not perfect in any sense, but it's a lot better than it was two years ago. And that was a lot better than it was two years before that.

David 05:49

And that was much, much better than it was two years before that. And the reason that Google Translate is getting better

and better and better is that we kind of help it. So when we put our sentence or our document in and it suggests a translation, there's a little box where we can correct that answer.

David 06:08

And actually, no, no, a better translation is this. And already from us humans, it's learning how to translate things better. It's also looking continually across the web to places where there are lots of translated documents.

David 06:20

The classic source for all of this is the European Union, where pretty much every document that the European Commission produces has to be put into 27 different languages. And so online, there are 27 language versions of the same document again and again and again, and artificial intelligence can simply go out there and see how the European Union is translating things and learn and learn and learn.

David 06:45

And as a result, now Google Translate is a really good first option for most people wanting to translate something. And as a result, translators are going to have to change the service they offer. They can't simply be a straightforward translator from A to B.

David 07:03

They have to insert, and we'll look at this later, a sort of humanity into the work they do. But that's absolutely AI learning and putting some people out of work.

Ross G 07:13

But the AI is learning to get better at the thing that it is designed to do. So in your case, it's getting better at translating. It's not deciding to do something completely different, pilot planes, for example, or to cure cancer.

Ross G 07:30

And so it could do that if we asked it to. But the sort of sci-fi vision of the AI becoming self-aware, thinking that these fleshy, meaty, human-y things are the most inefficient part of the system and can be disposed of.

Ross G 07:45

I mean, how far are we from that, I guess.

David 07:49

Well, I mean, personally speaking, I think we're never ever going to get there. I think it's a good science fiction anxiety, but that comes into a sort of philosophy about what it means about being self-aware and actually comes into the philosophy about whether we humans are really self-aware or whether life is deterministic.

Ross G 08:06

Some of us more than others. That's a cheap joke.

David 08:09

I think AI in one sense is quite self-aware in the sense that it knows when it's doing something better. It absolutely gets that. The idea though of humans being the annoying part of the system is not in the future.

David 08:25

We already have it currently. I mean, Elon Musk, I think back in, I'm not quite sure when, when he was speaking in the early days of Tesla to investors, he very famously said that the humans were the least useful part of the assembly line production process at Tesla factories, because it brought everything down to human speed, I think is what he said.

David 08:47

And that his aim, and he was saying this to investors, was to remove humans as much as possible from the manufacturing of Tesla cars. And as we know, car manufacturing is somewhere where robots are hugely employed, almost all the cutting and the welding and the assembling of a motorcar is now done by a robot and done very well by a robot and the humans in those factories tend to do things like step in when something goes wrong, switch the machines on, switch the machines off, change the configurations of the machines if there's a different model needs to be produced and so on.

David 09:23

But you know, Musk already thinks that the human aspect is the least useful part of that particular process. And so I don't think we'd be surprised if suddenly AI turns around and says we're the, we're the least useful part of a process.

David 09:36

But I think we do, we will need to have a response, which is say, what do we humans contribute that AI or mechanical machines don't contribute? And this to come back to the translator would be something like I get something to do with style, for example, I get something to do with the author's intention here, I get something to do with how that, that little bit of irony or that little clever, self-deprecating remark needs to remain in the translated version of the text.

David 10:07

In other words, I'm sort of channeling the person who wrote this and reflecting what their intentions are. And it'd be very hard, I think, for example, for an AI translator to get that. And so we humans will be under threat in many, many processes.

David 10:23

And reasonably so, you know, Tesla's are made faster and better and more cheaply because we're not much involved in welding together the panels of the car. But in return, we're going to have to come back and say, well, actually, what we can contribute is X and Y and Z.

David 10:39

And this is how we're going to be earning our livings.

Ross D 10:41

I was smiling there, Ross has heard this story before, but I studied languages at a university and I'm not working as a translator now, which is possibly indicative of what we're talking about, but just to your point about sort of machine learning versus sort of translation as itself, a creative act, so there was an example of a text that I had to translate in university was an article about Nicolas Sarkozy's son, how it was sort of about nepotism and how he'd been given this top job at La Defense, not because he was qualified, but because he was the president's son.

Ross D 11:09

The French title was Don l'épave du sont peur, and épave, in French, is et t'aime lissement publique à la defense. But it's also a play on words in l'épave, which is in his father's footsteps, which if you translate that into English, you can have the, in his father's footsteps, but then you lose the reference to this institution.

Ross D 11:28

So as a translator, you have to make a choice there. I think the, where like machine learning, I think does very well is sort of, you know, it can take all this stuff that already exists and make choices about, based on everything else that I've been fed, what would be the most appropriate translation in this context, but I think possibly where it struggles still is that sort of art of creating something from scratch.

Ross D 11:52

I think translation in certain contexts is still like a creative process.

David 11:56

No, I think it is, but I think I want to ask, I want to push back on the idea whether AI will have trouble creating something from scratch, partly because I'm not sure if we ever created it from scratch.

David 12:08

What is originality? You know, but also, I wonder if there's also something, you know, there's a lot of amazing music and painting done by AI at the moment. I gave a talk on artificial intelligence a long time ago, actually, when I had a very different position, I mean, I, I've changed my position on this whole topic.

David 12:23

I used to think in a completely dystopian way that we were all screwed. Robots are going to take all our jobs and we would just descend into abject poverty unless we did something about it. I've changed my thoughts on this, but in that period, one of the examples I gave was in the talk, I would always go, well, you know, people go, you know, AI can't be creative, there's always going to be room for human creativity.

David 12:47

And then I would play a piece of music that I'd found on the internet. And, uh, it was a song, it was a soprano voice with a piano accompaniment. And it was a setting of, I think, uh, a romantic poem made by Yeats or Shelly, by Shelly, and, and it was quite good.

David 13:06

It was, it was very modern kind of song. It was felt very, in those days, 20th century. And, um, the, if it was sort of song, if you heard it at the proms and someone said, this is the proms debut of a new composer.

David 13:20

You'd think, wow, that's pretty good. This guy's going to go really far. And then you reveal of course, that this song was entirely written by a computer at the university of Malaga, which basically did what we just said, which was just, it went and looked on online to find out what, how composers usually set romantic poems found often was for solo voice and piano, listened to a lot of those songs and then produced this song.

David 13:44

And when you dig a bit deeper, you find it also produced about a dozen or two dozen other songs, which were just simply dreadful and discordant, but by some sort of miracle, this one popped out. But the effects on the audience, when I gave this talk was quite electric because they suddenly felt they'd been conned that they'd liked the song.

David 14:04

And now they felt they shouldn't like it because it was written by a computer. And what it really gets to is where, what is creativity? When we celebrate creativity, I think we're trying, we're actually celebrating, what we really mean is we're celebrating something a human has done.

David 14:18

A human achievement. That's why we like to applaud. That's why we like to read the book. That's why we like to buy the album, whatever it is. And the disappointment that audiences always felt when I revealed that this song was written by a computer at the university of Malaga was nothing about the quality of the song.

David 14:34

The song has simply not changed, but it was about their feeling about why we like creativity. And I think that's the important insight for us here.

Ross G 14:43

I think as well, that trick only works so many times because one of the things that we appreciate about human creativity is the scarcity of it. And so I think a good example of this is the Lord of the Rings trilogy, things an absolute masterpiece.

Ross G 15:01

Then The Hobbit came out, wasn't quite so good. It's three films when maybe it could just be one or two. I think we started to feel a bit saturated with Middle Earth and we had an AI creating a Lord of the Rings adjacent film every week or every five minutes.

Ross G 15:17

Anytime that we wanted, we could spin up a new Lord of the Rings story, no matter how amazing they were, you become fatigued with it. So there's almost like this, the better and better the AI gets at that kind of thing, the less value there is to each individual experience that you would go through as a human.

Ross G 15:36

You really need a human to pivot and say, we're gonna do something radically different here rather than keep finessing the thing that worked in the past.

David 15:45

But why couldn't AI do something radically different?

Ross G 15:48

Yeah, I don't know. It's a good point, and perhaps they could. I'm going to explore that in a minute in the kind of leadership and management context to bring us back to kind of the topic at hand.

Ross D 15:58

Just to bring us back round to talking about this or workplace context we started this conversation by talking about the first industrial revolution and concerns around that you know technology was going to put a lot of people out of work make us all unemployed that didn't happen some jobs were lost but new jobs were created to what extent is that what we're seeing now David

David 16:20

I think it's exactly what we're seeing now and the great advantage is we can look back to then and see more properly with hindsight what actually happened during the first industrial revolution, which was indeed the machines that were introduced in the end created a massive increase in productivity, in wealth, in employment, pretty much everywhere they were.

David 16:42

I mean, they were obviously a very, very good thing to be introduced. And indeed, at the time, there were people who, the Luddites especially, who pushed against them and actually said, no, no, we don't want to lose our jobs.

David 16:53

We don't want to, you know, we need to buy bread and, you know, feed our families. And we don't want to lose our jobs to a machine. And they broke the machines. And indeed, in a sense, both points of view were right, because what happened was there was a gap between the new jobs arriving that the greater productivity produced and the old jobs leaving.

David 17:16

And, you know, Engels, who with Marx wrote the communist manifesto, called this the Engels gap. You know, he observed it firsthand. And he said, well, sure, in the end, economies grow and therefore there's more work, but there's this sort of pause in between in which lots of people are thrown out of work and the new jobs haven't been created.

David 17:39

And what I think is happening now is exactly the same thing is happening over again, except it's more accelerated. And an example I always think of is when I started work as a journalist in print media, the newspapers were produced by something called hot metal typesetting.

David 17:54

And in the basements of big newspapers around the world were people who literally set the metal type to print the page of the newspapers every day. And they were printed on inky presses. And pretty at one point pretty quickly, in about around about 1985, 86, primarily because of the arrival of Apple, we ended up with what we used to call desktop publishing, the idea that this setting could be done by a person with a keyboard and a computer.

David 18:25

And all those people lost their work almost instantly. And this was a machine replacing a trade which they'd spent a long time learning and building and relying on for their retirement, basically. And about half of them sort of stayed in the industry and did different things.

David 18:43

And the other half sort of retrained. And some abandoned it completely and became cab drivers or whatever. But some actually spotted a new job on the horizon, and they became website developers. The internet was arriving and suddenly we had these things called websites, and we needed someone to make these websites.

David 18:59

And some people very cleverly re-skilled and learned HTML and became early website designers. Now, of course, website designers are pretty thin on the ground because we have computers who can do website design online.

David 19:13

There's Squarespace and other services like that, which means that we don't really need a website designer. We can actually have a computer who can do it pretty well, certainly much cheaper than a person and much more quickly than a person.

David 19:25

And so now the website designers are having to look for something else to do and so on and so on. And so this sort of flow of

a job being destroyed, a new one arriving is turning into an old one being destroyed, a new one arriving, that new one being destroyed, another one arriving, and then that new one being destroyed, et cetera, et cetera.

David 19:42

And I think this is why we're more anxious about it now. Now, this is talking from the point of view of very privileged people who live in a wealthy city who can retrain from typesetting to website design to, who knows, yoga instruction or whatever.

David 19:56

But look, what's happened to yoga instruction during lockdown, where a lot of people suddenly discovered that they could go online and have a yoga teacher who actually lives in Malibu rather than around the corner to them, and they preferred them to their local yoga teacher.

David 20:08

And then suddenly now technology has put that local yoga teacher out of work as well. So in a way, the Luddites were right, but not quite then, they're more right now. And that's why this issue becomes a kind of political issue for us, because the speed of improvement of technology is almost unimaginable at the moment.

David 20:32

And this is primarily because of artificial intelligence. We really haven't grasped the astonishing capability of machine learning, but also we humans have adapted to machines for the Luddites. These were pretty much the first machines, whereas now we're used to going online, you know, the three of us are talking online right now, and it feels natural.

David 20:51

So why not get a yoga teacher from Malibu, or get a computer to do my website, rather than going to the local yoga person or website designer and giving them work. So what I think we have now is actually a big employment issue that savvy consumers, and that means pretty much all of us, can choose so widely amongst distant suppliers and bits of computer, that actually people who normally felt they'd have a bit of a local market for their products are suddenly find their work has gone.

David 21:24

And it'll be a while until the economy grows enough for them to suddenly discover the brand new job that we can't imagine now and move into that.

Ross D 21:33

So, what sectors, what industries do you think are most at risk of automation?

David 21:40

Well, it's funny, actually, before we started, before we met online and started recording this, I went on a website called, I've got it here, actually, let me just, I printed out in a rather old fashioned way, the screenshot of the website.

David 21:51

It's called, will robots take my job .com? And it's great. You can type in your job and it'll give you a kind of percentage possibility that your job's going to get stolen. And so I got a few here. I put in, for example, lawyers, lawyer, and found actually that it basically judges it by what it's called automation risk.

David 22:17

How easy or how hard is it for your job to be automated? Because that's the key question here, because if it's easy to automate it, you probably will find a robot doing it pretty soon. So lawyers, that came pretty low, 5% automation risk, it said.

David 22:33

But then I put in like legal assistant, paralegals. And suddenly that's 85% risk. I mean, they're out of the water. And I think that was a very interesting story actually, because anything that's kind of a bit repetitive, a bit routine, following rules is at risk to being done by a machine and paralegals do a lot of transferring data from document A into form B and turning it into database C, that sort of thing.

David 23:02

And, you know, referring to page 379 of some law book and drawing up the judgment in some court case, et cetera, all of these things, because they're quite routine and repetitive, are automatable. And indeed, lots and lots of law firms are automating exactly those jobs, which is an interesting problem for the world of law, because those are the jobs that entry

level lawyers used to do.

David 23:27

And that's how they started to get the hang of the industry. And that's how they started to learn the skills that eventually would make them become fully fledged lawyers. And right now they're finding that those entry level jobs don't exist anymore.

David 23:40

Now, obviously I'm a journalist, so I typed in journalist and reassuringly I found, you know, again, a really low automation risk. I'm not sure if that's actually true and we can talk about that if you like, but you know, my job as a reporter seems to be pretty secure, but I also typed in, you know, editor proofreader and it came out sort of proofreader and copy markers and again, a really high risk 82% because we know, you know, if, you know, the old days we needed someone who knew how to spell to make sure your spelling was correct before it got published.

David 24:09

Now our word processor corrects our spelling as we go along. And this is very interesting to me because even though I'm pretty confident my journalistic career will last just about to the point of my retirement.

David 24:23

Um, the extension of a spell check is a kind of sentence suggestor, and we're already getting that in Gmail does this, you know. So the, you know, if you, if you switch on all these features, especially in Google, something rather terrifying happens that actually you start writing a sentence and it suggests the next bit of the sentence.

David 24:42

And actually it's pretty good. What it suggests or actually, dare I said, it's even a bit better than what you were going to write. And we've seen this a lot in email writing, you know, we, we're getting used to this, you know, when on my Gmail, at any rate, when you, when someone sends you an email, there's little buttons about a possible reply.

David 24:59

You know, yeah, that's great. Let's do it or something like that. Now, this is the AI guessing what I was just about to write and pretty often getting it right, because it's looking at what I usually write in response to those emails.

David 25:11

So the question is how fast that will be before that becomes what we usually call a reporter's job. And the truth is it's already here. Now, you know, Forbes, for example, is a website that has used computers for a very long time to put up short bits of news, usually company results news.

David 25:32

And we can imagine this works quite well because company results, they get delivered to the, to the market in a particular format. You know, this is the fourth quarter results, you know, sales were up this profits were down that the share price is this and a computer turns that into a piece of prose, which gets up on the website almost instantly.

David 25:50

And the advantage for Forbes is twofold. First of all, they get the news straight away to their readers. And secondly, they don't need a human being to do that. Weather forecasts are also done the same.

David 26:03

Now, as a reporter, I'm a bit worried that, you know, what do I do? What do the three of us do really apart from get information and repackage it to other people, which is exactly what that computer's doing.

David 26:14

And we might say a bit like our previous bit of conversation about creativity. Oh, they could never catch our wonderful style. But the truth is, I'm not sure if we all have a wonderful style. And I wonder if actually sometimes the AI might give be able to express something more simply rather than us fretting about, you know, that passive verb and that subordinate clause all afternoon and just actually get the reporting out of there.

David 26:39

So the will I will robots take my job dot com is a bit reassuring to someone like me, and it's not reassuring to someone who

has a repetitive, straightforward job. And the classic thing, of course, is where we're seeing this already is in warehousing and transportation.

David 26:54

You know, so warehouse, most warehouses now are full of robots. And what they're doing, especially in a warehouse with lots of different items, like a big Amazon warehouse is they're running around finding all the different things that we've ordered and bringing them together for somebody to put them in a box and label it up.

David 27:13

Whereas before, those would be human beings running around to try to find those things. And indeed, when I put into will robots take my job dot com stockers and order fillers who are, you know, the the the people really being threatened by robotics.

David 27:28

Up comes the automation risk 66 percent. I mean, it's only low because they're pretty much all automated out of out of business already. But even better, before it took me to that page, I got an online ad which says here, robotic sort of induction, design, develop and deploy robotic solutions into your existing warehouse operations.

David 27:47

So the robots are sort of pushed in the way with an ad for something for me to get rid of human beings from my warehouse. So the short answer is if it's repetitive and rules based, you're dead in the water.

David 28:02

If it's involves some sort of aspect of two different things, which are quite contrasty, one is humanity and the other is fiddliness. Then I think you're safe. And by by humanity, I mean, a lot to do with the service industry.

David 28:17

You know, there's there's a lot. There's a lot in the way we interact with other human beings, which actually is a value added action. You know, the politeness of the person, the the smile they give us when we come into the restaurants, the attention they pay to us when we go to with a complaint to the customer service department, et cetera.

David 28:37

These are these have value and companies at the moment are finding that hard to replicate with computers. I mean, already to look into a customer complaint, when we go online and talk to one of the little bots that pops up on a website and says, you know, how can I help you to begin with?

David 28:55

We're talking to a computer in pretty much all all the cases. And their hope is from the company's point of view that computer will solve our problem will go away and there won't be a human involved.

David 29:05

But pretty quickly at the moment that we've put on to a human being who then presumably skims down the conversation we've just had with the computer and can work out what the problem is, but essentially can also be charming or sympathetic or understanding these things which we really value.

David 29:26

And the other aspect that the robots are pretty poor at, at the moment, is fiddly things. And I always say, it'll be really hard for a long time for a robot to clear a restaurant table at the end of a meal.

David 29:40

If you imagine what a waiter does, you know, the people are still sitting around chatting. Everything is, you know, dirty plates, old napkins, forks all over the place, salt and pepper in the middle, you know, some glasses, some are clean, some are not.

David 29:53

But the waiter knows instantly what to do with every item on that table. What to leave, what to take, what to throw in the bin, what to put in the dishwasher, et cetera, et cetera. A robot still now finds that a very, very difficult task to do.

David 30:08

So human and fiddly, I feel we've got hope yet, a routine and rule-based dead in the water, to be honest.

Ross G 30:17

So my, my current job, and I scored 4% on the automation risk scale and are quite, quite low. Oh, well that's amazing. What did you type in? So I ended up with, I was looking to a few different options.

Ross G 30:29

I came up with training and development specialist. That's where I ended up as well. That's a hundred percent right.

David 30:33

When you were looking around for different jobs, were you looking for the low likelihood of percentage? Is that right? No, no, no. I... Because that's obviously what we need to do. Yeah, yeah. I mean, you know, when we come...

David 30:41

Sorry to interrupt, Ross, but when we come to looking at our future, that's what we're looking for. But go ahead. Sorry, I've been interrupting. No, no, no. All right.

Ross G 30:48

Um, yeah, I did have a project manager at first and that was about 11%, something like that, but these, so these are jobs where you are, um, a lot of my work is sales and persuasion cause I, cause I head up the team.

Ross G 30:59

Uh, so it's a lot of that or fiddly, which is people only bring me the problems that typically they've got stuck on themselves. So don't, don't often get asked to solve easy questions, but the, um, the way that you talked about your role, David, that you might make it to the end of the, of your career kind of made it seem like for any job, it's inevitable that it'll be automated.

Ross G 31:21

It's just then a question of when that happens.

David 31:23

Yeah, I think you're probably right. I mean, I'm not sure any, any, any job. And weirdly, I think waiters, will almost be the last survivors.

Ross G 31:31

On an infinite time horizon.

David 31:36

Well, there won't be any food on an infinite time horizon, so we won't need to waiter.

Ross G 31:39

A hundred years, a hundred years, could add to your roadmap.

David 31:42

It's hard to know. I mean, the truth is I'm very skeptical.

David 31:46

I know why people do it, but I'm very skeptical about predicting the future. I mean, I've been the editor for 10 years of a thing called The Wide World, which predicts the next 12 months. It comes out in November and we predict the following year.

David 31:58

And we've done this for 10 years in a row, and we've hit it about 60% of the time. And usually we've called something a bit early, but the truth is we don't really see ahead very well how technology and anything else, geopolitics or economics is going to play out in the future.

David 32:15

So it's hard to say in a hundred years' time or whatever, because a hundred years ago, they had no idea what a website developer might be, and quite a lot of people until recently under good living from being a website developer.

David 32:25

So presume there'll be something like virtual reality dog groomer or something, which we're not quite picturing at the moment, which we're all going to be doing. But to be more serious, the key thing about the future is that the whole point of automation is that more gets done by fewer people.

Ross G 32:44

All right, it should seem like a positive thing, right? We're talking about it like it's a threat or a risk. We should be thinking about this as a utopia. Yeah, but I mean, we're

David 32:50

Well, let's put our cards on the table. It's a risk if lots of people lose their work and don't have any income. That's a risk.

Ross D 33:00

You know, it becomes a political decision. That's where things like universal basic income come in. So if a lot of people are going to be out of work permanently, economically, there needs to be demand for the goods and services that the few remaining people who control the capital are able to sell them to.

Ross D 33:17

And so if all these people are to work with no income, there's no really incentive for that system to exist. So in which case there would need to be some sort of way for these people to spend all their money on entertainment and things to just pass the tide.

David 33:31

No, you're right. I mean, there's an economic and there's a social reason to get people, to keep people occupied, put it that way. I mean, you're exactly right. You know, the famous phrase is robots don't buy products.

David 33:43

And that means even if our economy grows, it'll shrink again because no one will be buying anything from all this high productivity. But also people like to have something to do, you know, as well as having money to spend on basics.

David 33:57

And that's why, you know, universal basic income comes up a lot in this discussion. But also things like taxing robots comes up a lot in this discussion, because if we're seeing a world in which the real value is created not by labor, but by capital, which is really what we're saying, you know, if a factory is primarily automated machines, that's capital, that's not labor.

David 34:22

And if they are the people, those things are the people that are producing the real value from that factory, then at the moment, that's not taxed very efficiently by most modern taxation systems. And we might say actually, no, let's tax the robots in a different way, tax their productivity, and redistribute some of the income from that taxation to the people who've lost their jobs or who have fewer hours a week or whatever it is, as a result of those machines presence in our factories.

David 34:54

But that's not a technological question. That's a political question, which I think is important for us to bear in mind. You know, when I was in Silicon Valley recently, and there's still a kind of utopian optimism that technology will solve all problems.

David 35:05

But really, you can do that if you're in one of the richest parts of the planet, but you just need to go to downtown San Francisco, which is just up the road from Silicon Valley. And there's thousands of homeless people sleeping on the pavement who are not rescued by the technological utopia, which is just down the road from them. Sorry, what a downer.

Ross G 35:28

Yeah, it's a down beat to end on, but that might be where we're going.

Ross D 35:33

Okay, so let's wrap up. Ross, what will you be taking away from this conversation and applying your life this week?

Ross G 35:40

So I think to pivot away slightly from the notion of masses of unemployed people living on the street, I think if you are a manager, you could go on to Will Robots Steal My Job and do what David suggested, which is to start looking at what are the jobs that are less likely to be automated, which applies not just to you, but also to the people that you lead within your organisation.

Ross G 36:05

So if we can find opportunities to automate the kind of things that David was talking about, the repetitive and the mundane, then that creates all sorts of exciting free capacity to do other interesting work.

Ross G 36:15

So my reflection is to be more positive about this, but to not be blindly positive, to be proactive and seek out opportunities where humans and machines can coexist.

Ross D 36:29

Absolutely. I think that's my main takeaway as well. I think, as David was saying, you know, if you're working in a job that's currently very rules-based, you might want to start thinking about what new skills you could develop, but I think also sort of recognising that there's opportunities to not all doom and gloom.

Ross D 36:47

I think this technological revolution is also a tendency to over-blow these things. So yeah, putting a more positive spin on things. I think that's what I'm taking away from this conversation.

Ross G 36:59

Uh, but it's only overblown if you're positive about it though, can I, can I, like, you could sit back and suddenly find yourself without a job. Like if, if you want to be positive about it, I think you have to do something about it.

David 37:09

I think there's a really positive opportunity with all of this, and it's to do with how we see skills that we have traditionally in the world of work, a distinction between hard skills and soft skills.

David 37:21

We tend to think hard skills are things like financial planning, project management, systems control. They tend to have two word titles like that, and we tend to think soft skills are things like listening, empathy, resilience, self-knowledge, self-awareness, things like that.

David 37:40

And for lots of reasons, not least I think because of the kind of male bias of corporate life for most of its history, soft skills have been downgraded in our thinking. And we tend to think they're somehow things that women do at home rather than the things that men do at work, like systems analysis or whatever it is.

David 38:04

And I think there's an opportunity here because I really think AI especially is going to pretty much take away all the things we currently call hard skills from our work because it can project manage much better than we can.

David 38:18

It can financially plan much better than we can. Already the vast majority of shares traded every day in the world are traded by algorithms with no human input whatsoever. So those hard skills are being already now stolen away from us by computers.

David 38:36

And the opportunity for us is to say, well, the things we used to call soft skills are actually skills. And that we can start saying, I'm going to come to the company because I'm very good at empathic listening.

David 38:49

I can really get when my colleagues, when our suppliers, when our customers say things, what they really want. And I can really put that into words. And I can really turn that into a sales strategy, for example.

David 39:03

That's going to be the kind of skill that we will be, we humans will be bringing to the workplace when we're working alongside the robots. And I think about time too. Great, nice.

Ross D 39:20

So we've just got time for our regular feature one thing I've learned this week Ross do you want to go first

Ross G 39:27

Yes, I have a super cheery one. What impact do you think the COVID-19 pandemic had on traffic deaths in the US?

Ross D 39:35

I would assume it's declined..

Ross G 39:36

It has in fact gone up, and thank you for giving me the answer I was looking for. The US is enduring its most severe increase in traffic deaths since the 1940s, per capita vehicle deaths.

Ross D 39:50

more people driving irresponsibly because there's just...

Ross G 39:55

Yes, this is the New York Times. So people who are frustrated and angry is the short answer. So there's been, across a range of measures, Americans are lashing out. So driving, violent crime, custom reviews of workers, student misbehaviour in schools, vehicle crashes being the most pertinent, people are driving more dangerously, apparently, and also abusing more drugs when driving.

Ross G 40:16

So opioid and marijuana use among drivers are both up during the pandemic. So we've got a link to that in the show notes, a weird counterintuitive finding. The same trend is not seen in the UK. Road deaths have actually decreased in the UK.

Ross G 40:29

And that might just be because we are more boring and more likely to tolerate lockdowns and things. Nice cheery note to wrap up on.

Ross D 40:41

So for me, I have been relearning tennis this week, I used to play tennis a lot as a kid, and I have discovered as an adult that it is not like riding a bike. My timing has gone way off, but I'm quite enjoying it.

Ross D 40:57

I think another thing that I've discovered is that when I played tennis before, I never really played with much structure or with particular goals in mind, I just kind of messed about and never got good at the hard things to push myself to work on the things that I was bad at, like serving, instead focused on things that I was good at, like hitting a forehand.

Ross D 41:17

And so I think that's a more general rule for me to apply in my life is not to just do the things that pander to my ego and make me feel good about myself. But yeah, enjoying tennis basically is the thing that I've learned this week.

Ross D 41:30

David, what about you? What was one thing you learned this week?

David 41:33

Well, it's kind of two and they're related. In Britain, we buy 1.5 million cans of Heinz baked beans every day. 1.5 million tins are sold every single day, and that's just of Heinz baked beans.

Ross G 41:50

That seems impossible. Multipacks though... if you average maybe.

David 41:52

And I agree. And we can look into the sources. The figures seem to range, depending on which year you're talking about, between a million and three million. But I understand the most accurate for right now is 1.5 million tins, single tins.

David 42:07

Multipack might count as four, but basically, Heinz sell 1 .5 million tins of baked beans every day in the UK. And more importantly, that beans, when you buy them in a jar, taste much better than the ones in a tin.

David 42:24

And I discovered why on a very good sort of two-program edition of the BBC Food Programme on Radio 4 with my friend and colleague Sheila Dillon, started investigating beans. And she discovered a huge amount.

David 42:37

And I can vouch for the fact, having gone out and bought some beans in a jar rather than the tinned ones, my mind has blown. The scales have fallen from my eyes. And I suddenly realised what for all these years I've been missing.

Ross D 42:49

Maybe to draw some spurious cause and effect relationships here, maybe that's why we have fewer road traffic accidents in the UK. It's all the beans we're using, maybe it's mellowing us out in some way.

David 43:00

Absolutely, that's exactly the correlation.

Ross D 43:03

David, before we go, is there anything you want to mention anything else you want to please our listeners might want to go to learn more about you work.

David 43:12

Yeah, I'd just like to mention my website, which is DavidBakerOnline.com, and everyone is welcome there. I quite like a lot of different topics, so I can't even say what the coherence of the website is about.

David 43:25

But I'm interested in any stories, and my contact details there anyone would like to suggest a story for me to investigate. I would be delighted to hear from them.

Ross G 43:33

David's website is worth a read, I think, for just anyone. Robots or other miscellaneous interesting factoids is an eclectic mix of content. And I enjoyed reading it in prep for this episode.

Ross D 43:44

Thank you, Ross. I appreciate that. Great. We will put a link in our show notes. And that's it. You've been listening to the Future Talent Learning podcast with me, Ross Dickey and Ross Garner. Our guest this week was David Baker.

Ross D 43:55

Until next time, bye for now.