PARTNERSHIP ON AI

Policymakers: Opportunities for Impact on AI & Job Quality

Policymakers can shape the environments in which AI products are developed, sold, and implemented.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM "AI AND JOB QUALITY: INSIGHTS FROM FRONTLINE WORKERS"



Across industries and around the world, AI is changing work.

The development and deployment of workplace AI, however, often lacks input from an essential group of experts: the people who directly interact with these systems in their jobs. Despite the direct impact of workplace AI on them, workers rarely have direct influence in AI's creation or decisions about its implementation. This neglect raises clear concerns about unforeseen or overlooked negative impacts on workers. It also undermines the optimal use of AI from a corporate perspective.

"AI and Job Quality: Insights From Frontline Workers," a new report from the Partnership on AI (PAI) based on an international study of on-the-job experiences with AI, seeks to address this gap. Through journals and interviews, workers in India, sub-Saharan Africa, and the United States shared their stories about workplace AI. From their reflections, PAI identified five common themes:

READ THE REPORT

1

Executive and managerial decisions shape AI's impacts on workers, for better and worse.

This starts with decisions about business models and operating models, continues through technology acquisitions and implementations, and finally manifests in direct impacts to workers.

2

Workers have a genuine appreciation for some aspects of AI in their work and how it helps them in their jobs.

Their spotlights here point the way to more mutually beneficial approaches to workplace AI.

3

Workplace AI's harms are not new or novel.

They are repetitions or extensions of harms from earlier technologies and, as such, should be possible to anticipate, mitigate, and eliminate.

4

Current implementations of AI often serve to reduce workers' ability to exercise their human skills and talents.

Skills like judgment, empathy, and creativity are heavily constrained in these implementations. To the extent that the future of AI is intended to increase humans' ability to use these talents, the present of AI is sending many workers in the opposite direction.

5

Empowering workers early in AI development and implementation increases the opportunities to attain the aforementioned benefits and avoid the harms.

Workers' deep experience in their own roles means they should be treated as subject-matter experts throughout the design and implementation process.

PAI then drew from these themes to offer initial recommendations for key stakeholders in this space: AI-using companies, AI-creating companies, workers and the organizations such as unions that represent them, policymakers, and investors. This stakeholder-specific summary of the report focuses on policymakers, listing opportunities for them to steer AI in a direction that benefits workers as well as their employers.

Actors across the AI investment, creation, deployment, use, and regulation spectrum have opportunities to make decisions that center workers' voices and protect their well-being. These stakeholders have the power to transform AI's trajectory for the better. It is incumbent upon them to use it.

Opportunities for Policymakers

Through laws and regulations concerning both technology and labor, government lawmakers and regulators shape the environments in which AI products are developed, sold, and implemented, and thus shape the technologies themselves. As discussed above, there are and will continue to be instances where the incentives of AI-creating and -implementing companies strongly diverge from the interests of their workers. In such instances, government action will be required to ensure the livelihood and well-being of workers; as the historical record indicates, few businesses will voluntarily shoulder the whole of these changes. Compounding this, lack of worker voice and power often comes down to lack of worker protection (e.g., for organizing or ensuring correct worker classification). In some cases, AI technology further enables employers to exploit these power imbalances and policy or enforcement gaps. Strong regulation and enforcement, including of existing laws and policies, is all the more critical in these situations.

Government action will be required to ensure the livelihood and well-being of workers; few businesses will voluntarily shoulder the whole of these changes.

The heavily concentrated nature of the global AI research and workplace product development industry means that many workplace AI technologies are developed in and sold from the United States and China and then implemented in other regulatory environments. While the fractured, global nature of AI's impacts on workers impedes concerted efforts to protect workers, divergent regulatory environments offer opportunities for the experimentation and sharing of best practices in line with local norms and values. Conversely, countries with less economic power or enforcement capacity may find themselves in the position of reacting to harmful technologies created at or implemented from a distance; these situations require careful consideration and differentiated responses.

Much of the African continent, for instance, is both less well-placed to reap the economic benefits of AI (due to a comparative lack of telecom, computing, and other infrastructure, as well as a comparatively small skilled AI workforce), and more susceptible to potential workforce and labor market harms from AI use inside and outside the region (due to a comparative absence of protective regulations targeting AI use and impacts and weaker enforcement capabilities for labor protections). While a number of countries have been making recent strides on these factors, they are beginning from less advantageous starting points and starting at later dates than many high-income countries and regions. Proactively investing in AI workforce development and supporting infrastructure opens up the possibility of more "home grown" solutions responsive to local needs and values, rather than the status quo importation of technology from abroad that may undercut local social goals.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPACT

Worker voice	Safeguard worker organizing on working conditions (e.g., tech introductions and implementations) and unionization through additional legislation and enforcement as needed.
	Give workers the right to know about technologies used in their workplace, the data being collected on them, and the intended uses and impacts of the technology and data.[1]
Worker protection	Where possible, regulate and enforce protections from known harms to workers caused by AI through existing legislation and agencies.
	Create new, targeted legislation and regulations to address gaps in worker protection, either as standalone provisions focused on workers[2] or as a part of broader efforts to regulate AI technologies.[3]
	Protect worker organizing for improved working conditions (e.g., tech introductions and implementations) and unionization.
Tax policy	Identify opportunities to correct the balance of tax burden between labor and capital, which shape the conditions for when and how employers choose to use workplace AI technologies,[4] as well as workers' influence, leverage, or voice in workplaces.
Investment regulation	Require inclusion of relevant worker impact and human capital measurements in standard reporting and disclosure metrics.
Research grants and proposals	Require assessments of anticipated impacts on job availability and quality in government AI research grants.[5]
	Solicit ideas and prototypes of worker-friendly/worker-complementing AI technology (for instance, through RFPs or Grand Challenges) and fund their development with public research and development grants.
Low- and middle-income country (LMIC) responses	Create multi-country and multi-stakeholder collaborations across LMICs facing similar challenges and reform existing multistakeholder groups to provide more influence to the least powerful and most vulnerable participating groups. While perspectives from representatives of LMICs are included in some existing global multistakeholder efforts, the structure of these groups and their embedded power imbalances mean participation from less powerful actors may function as a "box ticking" exercise rather than as a true and influential representation of their specific needs.[6] The creation of collaborative groups facing similar challenges would enable them to work together on identifying specific needs, as well as to potentially take collective or coordinated action in addressing them.
	Invest in local AI workforces and infrastructure to support the development of workplace AI technologies that address local needs in line with local values.

Endnotes

1 Annette Bernhardt, Lisa Kresge, and Reem Suleiman, "Data and Algorithms at Work: The Case for Worker" (UC Berkeley Labor Center, November 2021).

2 Allison Levitsky, "California Might Require Employers to Disclose Workplace Surveillance," Protocol, April 21, 2022.

3 "The EU Artificial Intelligence Act," The AI Act, September 7, 2021.

4 Daron Acemoglu, Andrea Manera, and Pascual Restrepo, "Does the US Tax Code Favor Automation?," Working Paper, Working Paper Series (National Bureau of Economic Research, April 2020).

5 Emmanuel Moss et al., "Assembling Accountability: Algorithmic Impact Assessment for the Public Interest" (Data and Society, June 2021).

6 Kofi Yeboah, "Artificial Intelligence in Sub-Saharan Africa: Ensuring Inclusivity." (Paradigm Initiative, December 2021).