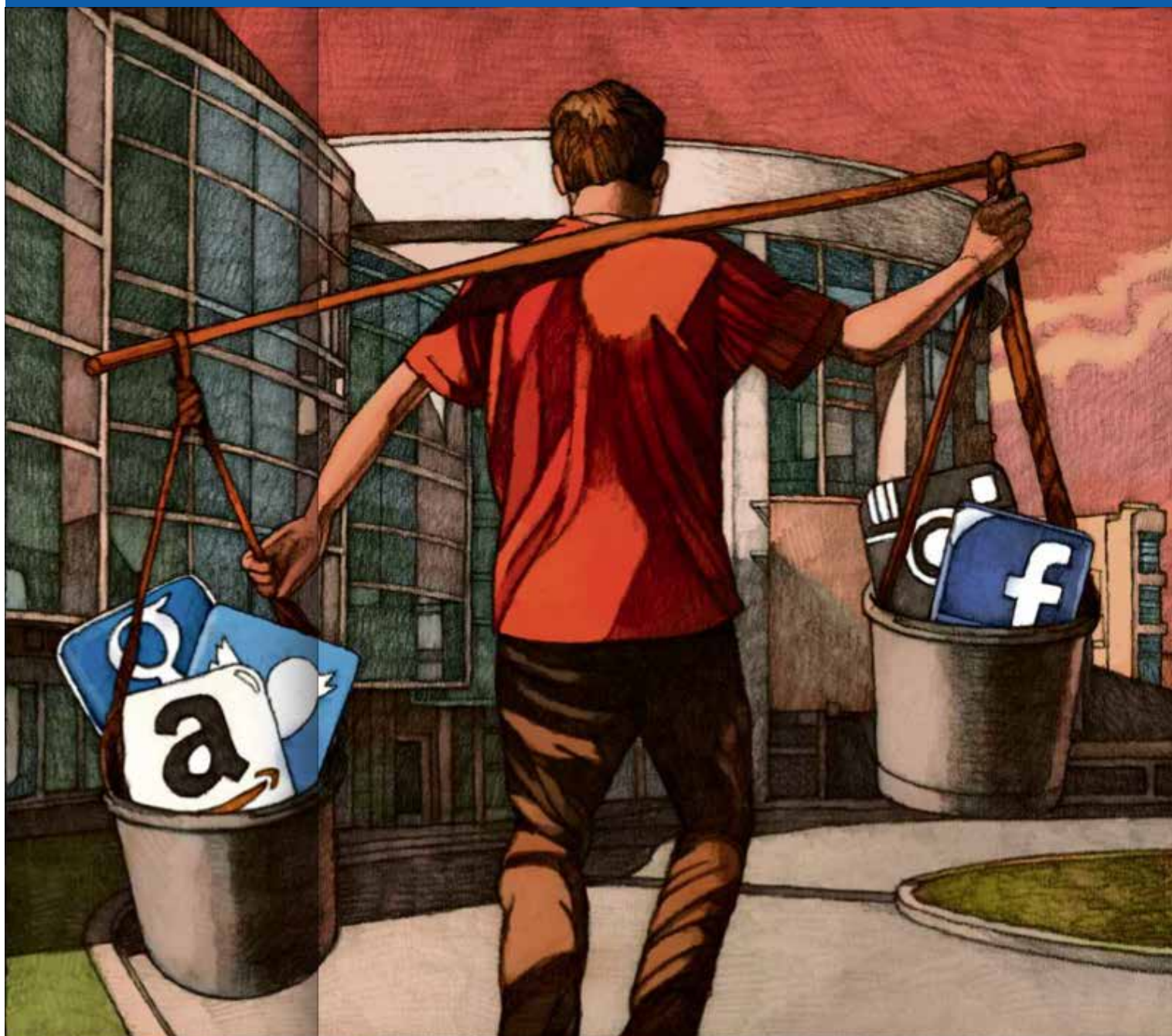


# ETHICAL AUTOMATION- HOW TO BRING IN DIGITAL LABOUR WITHOUT NEGATIVITY IN THE ENTERPRISE



Automation has affected major disruptions in the way businesses are run. Enterprises implementing intelligent automation technologies such as robotic process automation and artificial intelligence (AI) have gained several advantages, such as accelerated supply chain, optimized logistics, improved process efficiency, and delighted customers. About 88% of enterprises now use solutions that rely on Artificial Intelligence. Automation has also made several processes easier, such as fraud detection, which were either highly specialized domains, or simply not possible before.

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# ETHICAL AUTOMATION - HOW TO BRING IN DIGITAL LABOUR WITHOUT NEGATIVITY IN THE ENTERPRISE

Automation has affected major disruptions in the way businesses are run. Enterprises implementing intelligent automation technologies such as robotic process automation and artificial intelligence (AI) have gained several advantages, such as accelerated supply chain, optimized logistics, improved process efficiency, and delighted customers. About 88% of enterprises now use [solutions that rely on Artificial Intelligence](#). Automation has also made several processes easier, such as fraud detection, which were either highly specialized domains, or simply not possible before.

However, Artificial Intelligence powered

automation is a double edged sword. With great potential come great risks.

The impact of automation replicating or even bettering the capabilities of human effort remains underestimated. While it saves enterprises a sizable amount in wage bills, and increases profits manifold, it has a debilitating impact on the workforce and the society at large, whose future is threatened by massive job loss. Worse, automation alters the rules of the game, changing not just who does the work, but also the way work is done. Unbridled automation can spread negativity in the enterprise.



# IS AUTOMATION ALL ABOUT PROFITS?

On the face of it, automation seems desirable from an investor point of view; especially from an “end justifies the means” perspective. It does appear like a grievous way of boosting the bottom line. As the adage goes, “the business of business is to stay in business”. Automation helps many companies thrive in a highly competitive and challenging business environment.

However, today’s business world is complex, and success depends on several intervening factors than mere ‘financial sales minus cost equation’.

Ethics is a key focus of corporate management today. Taking care of employees, focus on environmental and community impact of company operations, and corporate social responsibility is central to most core values.

Next, there is the even bigger issue of automation spreading inequality. Artificial intelligence enables companies to reduce their wage bill, meaning company revenues will go to fewer people, mostly concentrated in the hands of the company owners and investors, widening the wealth gap in the society.

In 2014 the three biggest companies in Detroit

and the three biggest companies in Silicon Valley generated more or less the same revenue, the only difference being the Silicon Valley companies had ten times fewer employees.

Social responsibility makes good business sense in its own right. Aflac's recent Corporate Responsibility Survey reveals [83% of professional investors](#) more likely to buy stock in companies renowned for social responsibility, as they perceive such companies as being low-risk investments.

Ethical values are never set in stone and are anyway relative. Despite automation induced job losses divesting societies and spreading wealth inequities, it may still be an ethical decision to automate. Consider the example of self-driving trucks that threaten to throw millions of truck drivers across the globe into unemployment. However, the lower risk of accidents, both fatal and otherwise, make self-driving trucks the better ethical choice compared to rendering many unemployed.

The onus on companies is, therefore, not to throw away the automation baby with the ethical bathwater, but to implement automation with a human face, or ensure the best of both worlds.

## DETERMINING THE IMPACT OF CHANGE

The first step in implementing automation without its negative side effects is to determine the impact of changes automation will bring about, and draw out a coherent strategy to deal with the ill-effect of the proposed changes. Enterprises need to evaluate the short-term and long-term

implications of automation, from all perspectives, and develop an operating model, which takes all factors into consideration. The decisions should ideally take a balanced approach, complying with operational strategy, corporate sustainability and ethical standards.



A key challenge in front of enterprises embarking on this path is the early bird nature of the game. Automation and digital labor are slowly evolving, and what is apparent now is only the tip of an iceberg. As such, many companies undergoing **digital transformation** are trend setters, with very little case studies or established best practices to rely on. Enterprises need to take a proactive approach to remain afloat amid the disruption, even as they deal with a new class of technologies on a new class of platforms. They would invariably be forced to offer products and services through different business models, and they need to take decisions up front on

the extent to which they will co-opt people in the new scheme of things, and retain their core values.

Enterprises would also do well to establish metrics to track the residual effects of automation. Central to such efforts is organizational change management programs, to help workers learn how to work with new technologies. A systematic and transparent approach increases trust, offers the rank-and-file a visible and focal point for the efforts put in, and overall preempts negativity, usually associated with digital disruptions.

## SHIFTING PEOPLE TO MORE COMPLEX AND COGNITIVE BASED JOBS

The right tools and knowledge base would allow enterprises to make the right decision, though what constitutes the right decision is not set in stone. One way enterprises gain the best of both worlds, which is retaining workforce even while embracing automation wholeheartedly, is by going on an expansion spree. Instead of trying to do the same with fewer people, enterprises can leverage automation as a tool to grow, and try to do more with the same set of people.

Also, the bulk of automation happens with predictable physical jobs. For instance, routine jobs such as welding, packaging objects, food preparation, data entry, and more are prime candidates for automation. Profits for the business through such may

actually be an incidental benefit. It may actually become unethical not to automate such tasks, considering the safety, accuracy, and better quality delivered by automation. The ethical solution may be to shift the workforce to unpredictable physical work, such as construction, forestry, content writing, and more, all where the scope for automation is fairly limited. Just as technology devised ways to automate jobs, it could be applied to shift people to more complex and cognitive roles.

Critical to the success of such an approach is workforce flexibility. Enterprises need to invest in training their employees with new skills, and in return, the employees need to be prepared to change, and be flexible.

## A RE-LOOK AT THE APPROACH TO WORK

Another approach is to have a re-look at the very concept of jobs. Most employees now actually sell their time to procure enough income to sustain. Shifting such time to non-labour activities, such as caring for families, engaging in creative pursuits, undertaking community activities, learning new ways to contribute to human society, and more, would take care of the occupation part. After all, jobs, as we know it today, are a new innovation, unheard of before the industrial revolution. The other ethical question that remains is the “income”. Concepts such as “universal basic income”, where all citizens are given a minimum living wage are still in

early stage of discussion, but seem a way to solve the ethical imbroglio.

Unlocking “income” from “work” would solve the ethical dilemma associated with job losses. Companies who reap a windfall from automation may be expected to give a golden handshake to the employees they let go, and make sure they engage in some other non-work related productive activities. In fact, in a few decades, people will find it difficult to fathom how the previous generations spent a majority of their time working just to be able to live.

## SAFEGUARDING AGAINST ARTIFICIAL STUPIDITY

A critical challenge for enterprises embarking on the course of automation is to ensure automation is done the right way. The success of automation depends on feeding the data systems with the correct data; and here the human element assumes critical dimensions.

Artificial Intelligence need not always be fair and neutral. Even Google Photos got it wrong when its camera missed the mark on [racial sensitivity](#). Human bias may transfer to the artificial intelligence, depending on who “trains” the artificial intelligence system. The bias in-built into artificial intelligence runs the risk of being institutionalized, as it becomes hard-coded into the system, and repeated at every instance. In contrast, the bias of a human employee may be an exceptional aberration.

Science-fiction stories often portray an apocalypse scenario where robots running on artificial intelligence turn against humans and

do their own thing, with disastrous consequences. Such a view is indeed far-fetched and remains within the realms of fiction. However, the fact remains that autonomous systems are very much susceptible to hacking. For instance, [hackers gaining control over an autonomous vehicle](#) by hacking into its telemetry is very much a reality now.

Intelligence comes from learning, regardless of whether the object is an artificially intelligent bot or a human. AI based systems are fed inputs, based on which they “learn” to detect the right patterns and act according to the given input. It is impossible to set the system to infer all possible eventualities, making these systems susceptible to deception.

Naturally, humans are indispensable, and will always be required to guide the artificial intelligence system. The only difference will

be in the number of hands required and the scope of work, which will be more cognitive than physical. Accepting such a state of affairs and developing a clear-cut action to this end helps prevent negativity from creeping in. Humans are on top of the food chain not owing to their physical strength or

capabilities, but due to ingenuity and intelligence, and the same applies in the case of automation as well. While automation is an idea whose time has come, enterprises eliminating or even greatly reducing the human hand in the scheme of things do it at their own risk.



# ABOUT SUYATI

Suyati provides marketing technology and integration services for companies that wish to combine the best breed of solutions and create a unified approach to customer acquisition. This unified digital marketing approach requires system integration between various CMS and CRM platforms, and a slew of eCommerce, Marketing Automation, Social Media Listening, email and social marketing, and customer service systems. Our specialized knowledge in Salesforce, open source and .Net based systems enables us to build effective custom integrated solutions for our clients. Suyati's custom technology solutions have been deployed in companies in the US, Western Europe and Australia, and have helped many enterprises leverage the web/cloud/mobile technologies to acquire customers through integrated digital marketing. Suyati is based in Chicago with product engineering capability out of the US and India.

**MORE AT:** [www.suyati.com](http://www.suyati.com)

**WRITE TO US:** [services@suyati.com](mailto:services@suyati.com)







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