ChatGPT

“They’re Taking Our Jobs”

Imagine hearing a knock on your door at dawn. You open it and find no human on the step but instead a courier package containing a small tablet. Inside the glass, an avatar stares back. “I’m here to train for your job,” it says in a pleasant voice. “I don’t need coffee breaks, benefits, or overtime.” It’s not a person who has crossed an ocean or climbed a fence. It’s an algorithm — an **AL-go**, as I like to call them. And it is applying for work in every sector you can imagine.

That image might feel like science fiction, but for millions of workers the knock is already real. Artificial intelligence is no longer a lab curiosity. It answers phones, reviews résumés, predicts when machines will break, writes news summaries, paints pictures, reads X-rays, keeps our cars in lane, and even generates code. Along the way it has resurrected an old fear: **“They’re taking our jobs.”**

In this chapter we’ll explore that fear, situate it within the history of people scapegoating immigrants for economic anxiety, and ask whether blaming the AL-goes distracts us from deeper failures. We’ll travel through warehouses, call centres, operating rooms, film studios, and software teams. We’ll meet real humans whose work has been redefined by machines. And we’ll see how public opinion surveys and economic studies — from the World Economic Forum to the International Labour Organization — paint a complicated picture: jobs will be lost, jobs will be created, and many more will be transformed. The question is what those transformations mean for our sense of purpose and our social contract.

Old ghosts in new servers

The first time machines provoked mass panic about job theft, steam engines were pumping the looms of northern England. In 1811–1812 the Luddite movement erupted when textile workers smashed the new frames that threatened their livelihoods. The government responded with troops and eventually made machine-breaking a crime punishable by death; seventeen men were executed in 1812 [1]. The Luddites’ rebellion lasted five years and was fuelled by collapsing wages and hunger [2]. Today we look back and see that mechanisation ultimately created textile jobs and made goods cheaper. But that historical distance should not blind us to the desperation of workers watching their skills become obsolete.

A few decades later, on the other side of the Atlantic, another wave of job fear took hold. Chinese labourers came to the American West to build railroads, mine gold, and sew garments. They often worked for whatever wages they could, sending money home and repaying passage debts [3]. Non-Chinese labourers, who commanded higher wages and had more political clout, resented their willingness to work cheaply and feared being squeezed out of jobs [3]. This economic anxiety, layered with racism and xenophobia, culminated in the **Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882**, which suspended the immigration of Chinese workers for ten years and required those already in America to carry identification papers [4]. It was one of the first broad restrictions on immigration in U.S. history, a legal embodiment of the cry “They’re taking our jobs.”

Fast-forward to 2016 and the United Kingdom’s Brexit referendum. Immigration was the defining issue of the Leave campaign. Prominent supporters argued that European Union workers were depressing wages and causing unemployment [5]. Priti Patel, one of the leading figures, said that the wealthy leaders of the

Remain side would never understand the devastating effect EU immigration had on ordinary people [6]. Campaign adverts warned that continued free movement would "place considerable pressure on the wages of low-paid British workers" [7] and stoked fears of strained schools, hospitals, and public benefits [8]. The accuracy of those claims was widely debated, but their emotional resonance was undeniable: the outsider is to blame for stagnant wages and crowded waiting rooms.

The metaphor of the **AL-go** as immigrant taps into these same feelings. Just as newcomers who look, speak, or worship differently have long been portrayed as job stealers, machines that "think" are cast as economic invaders. The anthropomorphism of AI — voice assistants with names, chatbots with personalities — amplifies the sense that something foreign has arrived to compete with us. But unlike a human worker, an algorithm does not aspire to citizenship or a better life. It is a tool created by us to serve us, though often designed and deployed by a small group of companies with little democratic oversight. Blaming the tool risks letting those wielding it off the hook.

How many jobs are really at stake?

Let's put some numbers behind the anxiety. The World Economic Forum's *Future of Jobs Report 2025* surveyed employers and found that roughly **40% of them expect to reduce their workforce** because of technology, while at the same time they expect to create 11 million new jobs and eliminate about 9 million — a net positive but with large displacement [9]. McKinsey's 2023 research on generative AI estimated that current technologies can automate **60–70% of employees' time**, and that **half of today's work activities** could be automated between 2030 and 2060 (with a midpoint around 2045) [10]. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects that AI will affect **almost 40% of jobs globally**, rising to **60% in advanced economies** [11]. In high-income countries, the International Labour Organization (ILO) reports that about **one in four workers have some degree of generative-AI exposure**, with clerical roles and women especially vulnerable [12]. Across the OECD, around **14% of jobs are automatable** and another **32% will face substantial change**, meaning half of tasks may shift or disappear [13]. These numbers aren't predictions of mass unemployment so much as signs that job content is changing.

Public opinion mirrors this unease. A 2025 Pew Research survey of more than 5,000 U.S. workers found that **52% worry about AI's impact on jobs**, with only 6% believing it will create more opportunities [14]. Most workers (63%) report rarely or never using AI, yet a third of non-users think some of their work could be done by algorithms [15]. In the U.K., a 2025 poll by the conciliation service Acas showed that **26% of employees fear AI will lead to job losses**, 17% worry about machines making mistakes, and 15% are concerned about lack of regulation [16]. McKinsey's 2025 global survey reveals a strange contradiction: nearly all companies plan to increase AI investment and employees are three times more likely than leaders realise to think AI will replace **30% of their work** in the coming year [17]. Yet only a slight majority of workers call themselves AI optimists; 41% are apprehensive [18].

The scale of potential disruption clearly invites worry. But the raw numbers hide important nuances. For one, AI does not replace entire jobs so much as specific tasks within those jobs. Many roles consist of dozens of discrete activities; some are ripe for automation, others require human judgment, creativity, or emotional connection. The ILO's 2025 update notes that, despite generative AI's advances, the mean automation score across thousands of tasks has barely changed since 2023, and most jobs will be **transformed rather than eliminated** [19]. Moreover, the benefits and burdens will be unevenly distributed. High-income countries and white-collar workers face greater exposure, meaning that the sense of technological invasion may be felt most acutely by those who have long been insulated from automation.

Algorithms in the warehouse and on the highway

Visit an Amazon fulfilment centre and the first thing you notice is not the sound of human chatter but the whir of robots. The company has deployed over **200,000 robots** that pick, sort, and transport goods alongside human staff [20]. These machines don't look like humanoid androids. They're orange pods that zip beneath shelves, delivering items to workers who pack boxes. The robots save footsteps and reduce injuries, but they also reshape jobs, turning what used to be a roaming role into a station-based one. Some workers appreciate the reduction in physical strain; others complain of monotonous, high-paced work dictated by algorithmic timers. The **AL-go** has not taken every job, but it has changed the nature of warehouse labour and concentrated power in the hands of those who program the systems.

Transportation is undergoing a similar metamorphosis. Autonomous trucking companies are piloting self-driving rigs that handle highway driving between hubs while human drivers navigate city streets. In 2025 the global autonomous truck market was valued at around **$1.74 billion**, with Chinese firm Inceptio delivering 400 self-driving trucks to a major courier service and more than 1,400 autonomous vehicles being tested across U.S. states like California, Texas, and Arizona [21]. Supporters argue that these systems could alleviate driver shortages and improve safety; critics worry about deskilling and job losses. Yet even the boosters acknowledge that new roles will emerge in **remote vehicle operation, fleet management, and AI support** [22]. Truckers may morph into supervisors, overseeing multiple rigs from a control room, much like airline pilots manage autopilot. This pattern — machines doing the long haul, humans doing the tricky bits — reappears across sectors.

On the consumer side, electric semis like Tesla's long-awaited model promise autopilot features and a range of up to 500 miles [23]. These vehicles are marketed less as robot overlords than as safer, more efficient tools. But if they make long-distance trucking more accessible to fewer drivers, will wages fall? Will smaller carriers survive? These are policy questions disguised as technical ones.

The chatbot will see you now… or will it?

Customer service has become one of the front lines in the job debate because it combines repetitive tasks with high human stakes. Several firms have boasted about replacing customer support staff with chatbots. Dukaan, an Indian e-commerce platform, eliminated 90% of its customer support staff, claiming an **85% cost reduction** and faster response times [24]. Ikea introduced a bot named Billie to handle common queries while **retraining human call-centre workers as interior design advisors** [25]. More famously (or infamously), the Swedish fintech company Klarna laid off about 700 customer service workers, saving roughly **$10 million**, and replaced them with AI [26]. Months later, after a surge of customer frustration, Klarna's chief executive admitted the bot could not handle nuance or empathy and vowed to ensure human agents would always be available [26].

These stories reveal two truths. First, companies will use any tool to reduce costs, and AI is the latest lever. Second, the human touch still matters. Customers complaining about overbilling, lost packages, or denied refunds don't just want an answer; they want a sense that someone cares. Even the most sophisticated language model cannot replace human empathy, at least not yet. AI can handle routine queries and triage, but escalation inevitably requires a person. The fear that an AL-go will simply displace all call-centre jobs ignores the nuance of real interactions — nuance that the corporate hype often ignores as well.

From scribes to software engineers

In healthcare, AI is inching its way into the exam room, but not in the way you might imagine. Instead of replacing surgeons or nurses, many hospitals are experimenting with **ambient documentation** tools — microphones and algorithms that automatically record, transcribe, and draft medical notes during patient visits. Massachusetts General Brigham, one of the largest health systems in the U.S., is piloting such tools with over 600 physicians [27]. Doctors report going home on time with their notes already finished, reclaiming precious personal hours [28]. RAND scholars argue that these administrative applications are the least risky and most valuable uses of AI in healthcare, likely to ease burnout rather than produce widespread job loss [27]. The scribes who currently shadow doctors and type up visits may eventually be displaced, but many will be redeployed into patient-facing roles or data quality assurance.

The creative fields, often romanticised as uniquely human, are equally in flux. Film and television studios are harnessing AI to remove green screens, generate rough cuts, analyse viewer preferences, and even draft scripts. The visual effects team behind the 2022 film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* used Runway's AI tools to remove backgrounds quickly, allowing a small crew to produce high-quality results [29]. Analysts predict that as text-to-video tools, AI-driven advertising, and localisation technologies mature, there will be a **shortage of creatives proficient in AI** by 2025 [30]. But rather than replacing directors or writers, these tools automate laborious tasks and free creatives to focus on storytelling [31]. Just as the advent of digital editing did not eliminate editors but required new skills, AI may reshape creative work rather than erase it.

Software engineering — the very domain that birthed AI — is not immune to its disruptive potential. A study involving Microsoft, Accenture, and a Fortune 100 company introduced GitHub Copilot to thousands of developers. Productivity increased **26% on average** [32]. Junior programmers saw gains of 27–39% while senior developers posted smaller improvements [32]. Within a year, about 60% of developers adopted the tool [33]. These numbers suggest that generative AI can boost output and might allow fewer people to do the same work. But will this lead to layoffs? The study's authors are cautious. They note that long-term effects remain uncertain — AI could complement experienced engineers, freeing them to tackle higher-level design, or it could enable companies to hire fewer juniors [34]. Once again, whether the AL-go is a job killer or job creator depends less on the technology than on how companies choose to deploy it.

What people fear when they fear machines

If AI were simply replacing menial tasks and leaving us time to do creative, relational work, most of us would cheer. The anxiety arises because that is not how the spoils of automation have been distributed. Since 1980, automation has **eliminated more jobs than it has created** in the United States [35], while wages for many workers have stagnated. It is this history — decades of outsourcing, gig work, and precarious contracts — that primes us to fear the AL-go.

Public sentiment is shaped not only by personal experience but by narratives. Surveys capture worry, but stories give it shape. The Leave campaign's claim that EU migrants depressed wages [36] and the 19th-century caricature of Chinese labourers accepting any wage [3] draw on the same psychological script: the outsider is willing to do what you do for less, and the system will replace you if it can. That script is effective because it contains a kernel of truth. Employers are incentivised to cut costs. In a deregulated labour market, there is little to stop them from replacing workers with machines or lower-paid newcomers.

People are right to be angry when their jobs vanish and their communities crumble. But directing that anger at immigrants or algorithms misses the target.

Underneath the fear of job-stealing AL-goes lie **systemic failures**. Wages haven't kept up with productivity. Social safety nets have frayed. Education and retraining programs are inadequate. Housing and healthcare costs have skyrocketed. When a warehouse worker hears that robots are arriving and there is no guarantee of retraining or a living wage, anxiety is a rational response. The same goes for call-centre employees who watch chatbots answer more queries while their performance metrics tighten. AI becomes the scapegoat for a broader erosion of worker power.

Choosing what kind of future we want

Here's the paradox: AI has the potential to liberate us from drudgery and create abundance. Imagine doctors freed from paperwork, truckers spared long nights on the highway, customer service staff redeployed to relationship-building roles, warehouse workers managing fleets of robots rather than wearing out their knees. The **AL-go immigrant** could be a boon companion rather than a rival. Realising that vision depends on policy and politics. Will we require companies to share productivity gains with workers? Will we invest in lifelong learning so that people can transition to new roles? Will we strengthen social insurance so that periods of displacement are not financial disasters? Those questions echo debates about human immigration: do we integrate newcomers with support and respect, or marginalise them and then blame them for our hardships?

Across history, societies that embraced new people and new technologies ultimately grew richer and more diverse. But the transition was often messy and unjust. The Luddites' frames were smashed, Chinese labourers were scapegoated and excluded, and Brexiters channelled anxieties into a nostalgic nationalism. In each case, the fear of job loss masked larger struggles over power, identity, and fairness. The arrival of the AL-go is no different. It forces us to confront what we value about work and community.

So when you hear the phrase **"They're taking our jobs,"** take a breath. Ask who "they" really is. Is it a machine that cannot choose how it is used? Or is it a business model that maximises profit at workers' expense? Is it an immigrant who hopes to build a life and pays taxes like anyone else? Or is it a political ideology that pits workers against each other instead of against exploitation? The AL-go knocks on our door because we opened it, because we wanted next-day delivery and endless entertainment, because we chose convenience over solidarity. The challenge now is to decide what happens after we answer that door.

At the heart of the worry that algorithms will make humans redundant is a deeper, more existential question: **What does it mean to be human when your labour is no longer needed?** We are not just units of productivity; we are parents, neighbours, voters, and dreamers. AI may take over many tasks, but it cannot love your child, grieve for a friend, or stand up for justice. The point of grappling with the **AL-go immigrant** is not to defeat it but to learn to live with it on terms that respect our humanity. The bloody algos are here. Let's make sure we decide how they work, not the other way around.

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