

of the work. The remaining workers are being reshuffled to assembly lines likely to be automated with time. This increase in job automation and deskilling can cause some workers to lose their jobs because their skills have been substituted by machines.

We gathered data through in-depth interviews with 30 participants, drawn from three automobile companies. They included managers, autoworkers and workers representatives.

Our interviews with management revealed that management does not

necessarily prefer machines over human workers. But in order for the product to compete, they have to consider production capacity, quality and workplace economics.

Where they intend to introduce machines, it is not to take over the jobs of the workers but because some tasks require the use of machines. For example, one cannot expect workers to lift a car while another person is working underneath it. A machine can do that without endangering the workers. Still, management said that if given the chance, they would replace more workers with machines as robots perform more tasks efficiently and boost productivity without the need for negotiation.

What automation means for workers

Though robots have eased the process of labour, their increasing use stagnates the population of workers on the shop floor, paint floor, body shop and assembly line.

The decisions that resulted in the reallocation of many autoworkers from the body shop and paint shop to the assembly line are almost irreversible. One worker said:

If you have to look at the traditional press line, you would have an average of 20 operators. Now you only need four operators just to pack the parts. So, 16 workers are reduced by introducing five robots. The affected workers are moved to other departments within the industry for now.

Growth in the automobile industry does not create more jobs for human workers. Where automation does create jobs, it is mostly in managing the technology. It doesn't create work for existing skills.

This creates the threat of a rising unemployment rate, which was at 30.1% in the first quarter of 2020. That, in turn, contributes to South Africa's position among the most unequal countries in the world.

Driving forces

The adoption of technologies can relieve workers from strenuous tasks and boost productivity but will most likely also relieve workers of their jobs entirely.

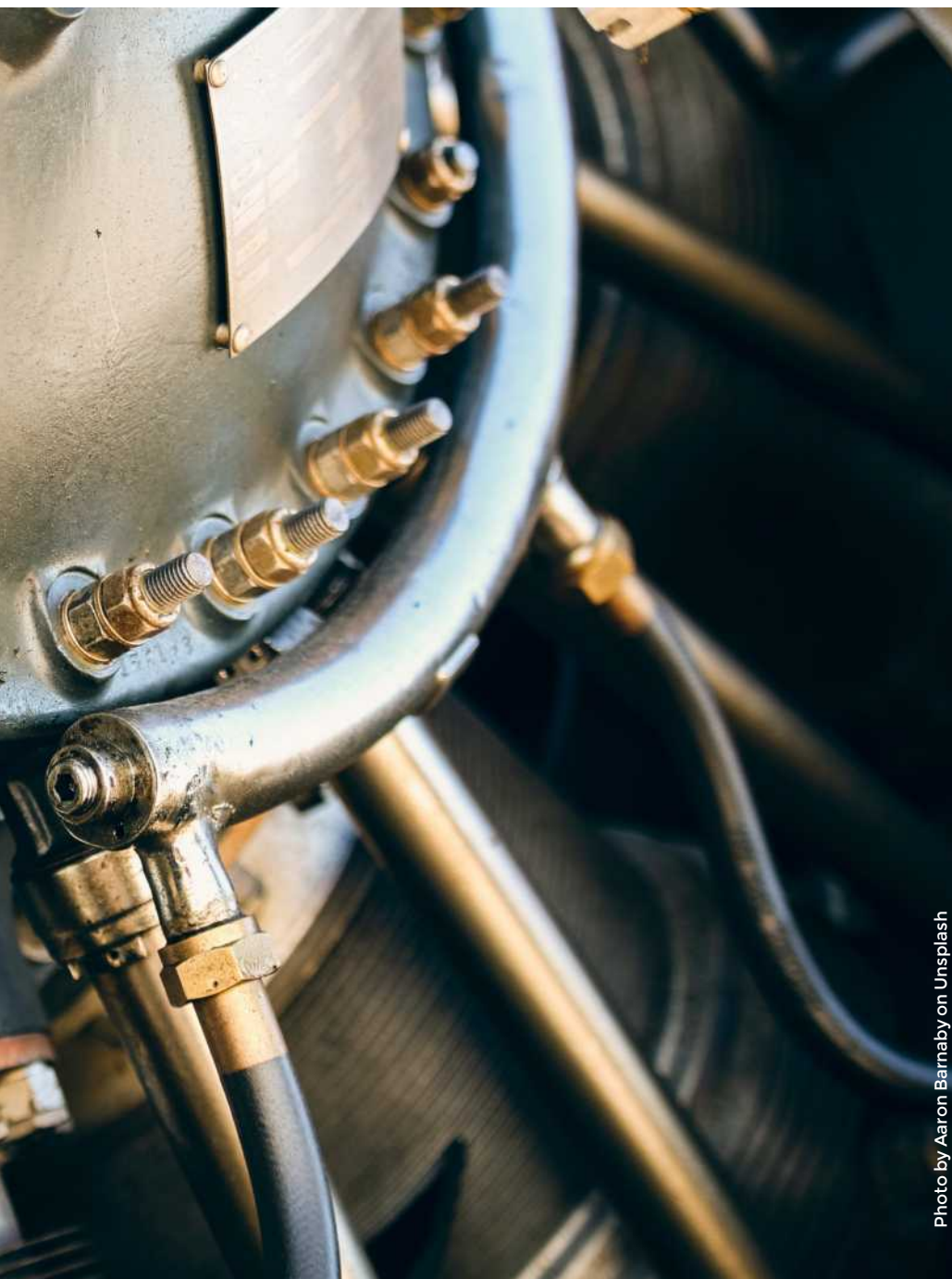


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