

# Like horses laid off by the car: BT tech chief's AI job losses analogy draws anger

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BT's technology chief, Harmeen Mehta, has suggested workers whose jobs are threatened by AI accept their fate as "evolution", comparing them to horses replaced by the car. In an interview with the business website Raconteur, Mehta said: "I don't know how horses felt when the car was invented, but they didn't complain that they were put out of a job; they didn't go on strike. "It's part of evolution. Some jobs will change, some new ones will be created and some will no longer be needed." She argued that "society changes and jobs morph", and suggested the tone of reporting on AI was holding back its rollout in the UK. "The media here is creating a level of paranoia that's going to paralyse this country," she said. Horse-drawn transport, still widely used in the late 19th century, was eventually displaced by the steam train and the internal combustion engine. There were still more than 3 million working horses in the UK in 1900, including those on farms. By the middle of the century, that number had declined to a few thousand. Anna Thomas, the director and co-founder of the Institute for the Future of Work thinktank, rejected Mehta's analogy. "Clearly, equating 'beasts of burden' with human workers is wrong," she said. "Yes, the adoption of new technologies has always brought about changes and transitions to new jobs. But our research offers strong evidence that engaging worker expertise through the process of AI adoption supports net job gains and improvements in job quality. "Complaints and strikes are made more likely when companies fail to treat workers with respect." A spokesperson for the Communication Workers Union said: "The right to strike has been a hard-won human right that should not be denigrated by people in positions of corporate seniority. Nor should the intelligence of workers, who just want a serious discussion on AI that respects their concerns and ensures there is reasonable protection for them. "Of course some jobs will be become obsolete and others will be created, but responsibility must be the watchword in the implementation of new jobs and technology." Mary Towers, the TUC's lead on AI, said: "It's not fear of job losses that paralyses innovation. It's monopolies, lack of good regulation and all the power over AI being in the hands of corporations." BT revealed in May that it plans to cut 55,000 jobs by 2030, more than 40% of its global workforce, with 10,000 being replaced by AI. More than half of the reductions are expected to come from the UK. The announcement came months after the company paid out £1,500 to more than 70,000 of its lower-paid staff after being hit by its first national strike in 35 years. Mehta, whose full title is chief digital and innovation officer, urged workers across the UK to, "wake up, reinvent yourself and get ready". Speaking about BT specifically, she said: "Why is it my job to make every person in the company relevant for the future? It's their responsibility to put themselves on the map and mine to create an opportunity for them to do that. It takes two to tango." Previously chief information officer at Indian IT firm Bharti Airtel, Mehta was brought into BT in 2021 as part of a drive to shake up the

digital strategy at the former state monopoly. Potential job losses across the economy as a result of the rapid rollout of AI have been widely discussed in recent weeks. Elon Musk, the owner of X, formerly Twitter, said at the prime minister's AI summit last week that "there will come a point where no job is needed". A spokesperson for BT Group said Mehta was "using a metaphor to stretch a point", adding: "In the past, during periods of technological change, people acquired new skills and ultimately new jobs were created. This is something we are keen to enable as we embrace human and artificial intelligence working alongside each other."