

Killer robots are stealing all of our jobs!

The automation industry faces an uphill battle against waves of negative publicity that have been emanating recently from the mass media. Steve Brambley, deputy director of Gambica*, argues that it is up to the industry to provide a more balanced picture.

I realise that a melodramatic headline – like the one above – is more attention-grabbing and sells more newspapers than *Useful automation is good at doing the tasks we don't like or do so well so that we can do more interesting things instead*, but it seems to be a worrying trend in the mainstream media. When menacing images of the Terminator accompany articles about robots, and journalists ponder how artificial intelligence is going to make human employees unnecessary, you know that we are facing an uphill battle to promote automation in a positive light.

Volkswagen has been in the headlines twice recently, with the high-profile story about using software and technology to cheat at emissions testing, and so to put 11 million cars on the roads that create 40 times more pollution than the test limit.

This scandal has rightly been front-page news – the wilful disregard of environmental protection at the expense of humanity is shocking. It is estimated that 50,000 people die prematurely due to pollution in the UK each year, so the consequences of this act could be deadly. But what this story reveals is the dark side of human nature. Despite having a technology that can reduce emissions by 98% (which in itself should be a cause for celebration and positive headlines), senior decision-makers in the world's largest car manufacturer allowed it to be disabled in order to sell more cars.

The automotive sector has long been held up as a shining example of adopting

automation and the UK has seen large-scale investment and success in manufacturers such as Jaguar Land Rover, Mini and Nissan, and the wider supply chain. But scandals such as this one can undo any goodwill, even if it is not the technology that is bad but the human decisions behind it.

Another VW-related story was reported by many popular newspapers as "Robot kills man" using emotive language such as "it grabbed and crushed him" lending the machine some kind of malicious intent. The reality is somewhat less dramatic, although no less tragic that someone died. A technician who was installing a robot was working inside the safety guarding when the robot was live. VW stated that the robot did

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not malfunction and that it collided with the person, resulting in a fatal injury. There was no intent, malice or deliberate act involved, it was an industrial accident of the likes that also involve forklift trucks or waste compactors, although they tend not to attract such sensationalised reporting.

For decades now, the myth of automation stealing jobs has been perpetuated by those who may not have a wider understanding of the impact on productivity, growth and creation of other jobs. This is nothing new. Back in the early 1800s, the Luddites were smashing up mechanised machinery for fear of losing their jobs.

However, at no time has there been a

mass unemployment caused by the introduction of automation technology. In fact UK unemployment is currently at the same level as it was in 1880, and about half of the peaks reached during the economic recessions of the 1930s and 1980s.

There has, however, been a demonstrable improvement in working conditions and employee safety since 1880. Germany, for example, has a highly automated manufacturing industry and one of the lowest unemployment rates in Europe. There is simply no logical argument that increasing automation causes unemployment.

On the contrary, automation is a driver of productivity, efficiency and reduction of waste. It improves competitiveness and is a path to growth and therefore actually creating jobs. An automation strategy can prevent relocation to a lower-cost country, protecting jobs and generating employment both directly and in the supply chain and service industry. The jobs generated are often less dangerous and repetitive as well as more rewarding.

As an industry, we not only need to promote all the advantages of automation, but counter the myths and misinformation that we come across. ■



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