The Ethical Implications of Digital Workers

Michael Cuellar
Georgia Southern University, mcuellar@georgiasouthern.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://aisel.aisnet.org/treos_amcis2020

Recommended Citation
Cuellar, Michael, "The Ethical Implications of Digital Workers" (2020). AMCIS 2020 TREOs. 60. https://aisel.aisnet.org/treos_amcis2020/60

This material is brought to you by the TREO Papers at AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). It has been accepted for inclusion in AMCIS 2020 TREOs by an authorized administrator of AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). For more information, please contact elibrary@aisnet.org.
The Ethical Implications of Digital Workers

TREO Talk Paper

Michael J. Cuellar
Georgia Southern University
mcuellar@georgiasouthern.edu

Abstract

It is well known that technology has changed rapidly over time. Technology is increasingly able to perform more and more activities that used to be solely the province of humans. The development of technology has impacted human society. Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2012) have shown that because of the replacement instead of augmentation of humans with technology in the last 20 years, private employment which used to follow increasing productivity closely is now largely flat. Similarly, Friedman (2007) pointed out the development of technology, combined with geopolitical events has caused dramatic changes in the nature of competition. In the future, we will see a convergence of artificial intelligence with other emergent technologies to take on even more advanced roles and become digital workers, technology that can serve as a functional replacement for human participants in work systems.

What Brynjolfsson and McAfee and Friedman have described is technologically based disruption, a change in the competitive characteristics of a market resulting in new expectations of competitors and causing fundamental change in value propositions. These disruptions to the competitive landscape and the advent of digital workers will require companies to undergo digital transformation, the technology-based change in business strategy and value creation in order to remain competitive in these disrupted markets. It is not enough to simply implement technology within a business. There must be a fundamental rethinking of strategic intent and value creation in order to successfully compete in the technologically disrupted marketplace.

But pragmatic considerations are not enough. We also need to consider the ethical implications of the rise of digital workers. It seems that we are using technology simply because we can without asking the question of whether we should. Such unthinking use of technology can have serious adverse impacts on people. For example, if an AI based loan approval system determines that residents of a certain zip code, populated largely by Latinos have a higher loan default rate than other zip codes, it will want to not make loans for property in that area, a case of inadvertent discrimination. We should have processes in place to prevent negative effects such as this. We also want to ask the questions about what should digital workers be doing? Are there certain jobs that we should not automate? What sort of regulation should be enacted? Who is liable for the actions of digital workers? Do digital workers have rights?

The increasing use of data also prompts questions about the appropriateness of that use. Data analysis has the capability to reveal things about us that we may not want to have revealed. To this point in time, data provided in the process of a transaction has been assumed to be the property of the receiving business and used for other purposes. But who really owns the data? What are permissible uses of that data? Is it permissible for a business to deny a transaction unless permission is given for these other purposes? Data about us and our actions has been increasingly collected by governmental agencies. The potential tyrannical use of data by governments to restrict human rights must also be considered.

We need to have a conversation around these questions. We are already experiencing the negative impacts of the unthinking use of technology. Before digital workers become reality, we need to have ethical principles and regulation in place so that negative unintended consequences are minimized.

References

