

CHARTING CHANGE

Workers' Voices in an
Automated World



An IAM Canada Report

WHITE COLLAR WORK



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AUTOMATION AND WHITE COLLAR WORK: IMPRESSIONS FROM IAM MEMBERS

“They’d love nothing more than to automate parts of the job, but, they can’t...yet.”

Although a minority, IAM members who can be classified as “white collar” provided a unique perspective on the impact technology has had on their jobs, workplaces, and structures of bargaining units. Unlike other groups, members in this group with seasoned experience in their industry noted how technology changed the structure of their bargaining units, namely that technological change had reduced the number of blue collar workers in the bargaining unit, whereas, the number of white collars grew at the same time. These perspectives have not just shone a light on challenges white collars face in terms of technological change, but more importantly, the urgent need to recalibrate organizing targets and grow the union into the future.

What Members Are Saying:

- “ Over time, lower level jobs in the bargaining unit disappeared, and are now in the minority; the workplace is a different landscape.”
- “ Instead of management giving us tools that help, they implement technology without consulting the very people that will work with those platforms. They’re giving us a hammer when we need a screwdriver.”
- “ Automation, AI and remote work equate to the same thing: the absence of people. The absence of people makes employers think they can automate, or outsource work.”
- “ There is a difference between making a job inefficient, versus obsolete.”

MEMBER EXPERIENCES:

- AI and automation is being used in accounting, sales, logistics, and supply chain management
- Robots are being used to help with orders, and in shipping and receiving.
- Digitization of work did away with hands on work, how information was recorded leading to centralized databases, and inputting of information was standardized. Autonomy and knowledge of workers who held the knowledge and experience transferred over to digital databases.
- Increase in clerical duties, need for technical and computer skills reduced the need for skilled tradespeople, with work procedures strictly defining between tasks done by skilled labour and white collar workers
- Computerization and standardization resulted in heavier workloads, limited ability to apply expert knowledge, routinization of tasks, and reduced autonomy for white collar workers across the board.
- Standardization of work through computer systems and programs streamline processes, but also increase the volume of work
- On-time delivery is having a clear impact on work of white collar workers in certain settings; upper management’s bonuses, in some cases, are tied to consistent meeting on-time targets and KPIs. Members noted that workers whose on-time delivery is below the threshold, are required to put in 6-10 hours of overtime weekly to meet those targets. Workers often deal with international suppliers in different time zones.

- On-time delivery targets blur the line between work in the office versus after hours at home.
- Remote work, which is easy to implement in white collar settings, make it easier to outsource or automate tasks. The idea of regional and global competition between workers was raised with increasing popularity of remote work.
- Higher education and skill levels protect white collar workers from job losses, but not from work re-organization and de-skilling.
- Concerns about workers who will lose their jobs, without having a place to land and stay unionized.

AUTOMATION AND ORGANIZING

- As work is re-organized, and new skills are needed as a result of technological change, bargaining units change
- Increasing numbers of white collar workers will put pressure on unions to adapt and organize workers who are white collar, and sometimes, working in part-time or contract work.
- More white collar workers and need for higher technical skills has resulted in greater numbers of supervisors and managers in certain workplaces, which also eliminates unionized jobs. This trend curbs union activism and growth of unions.

