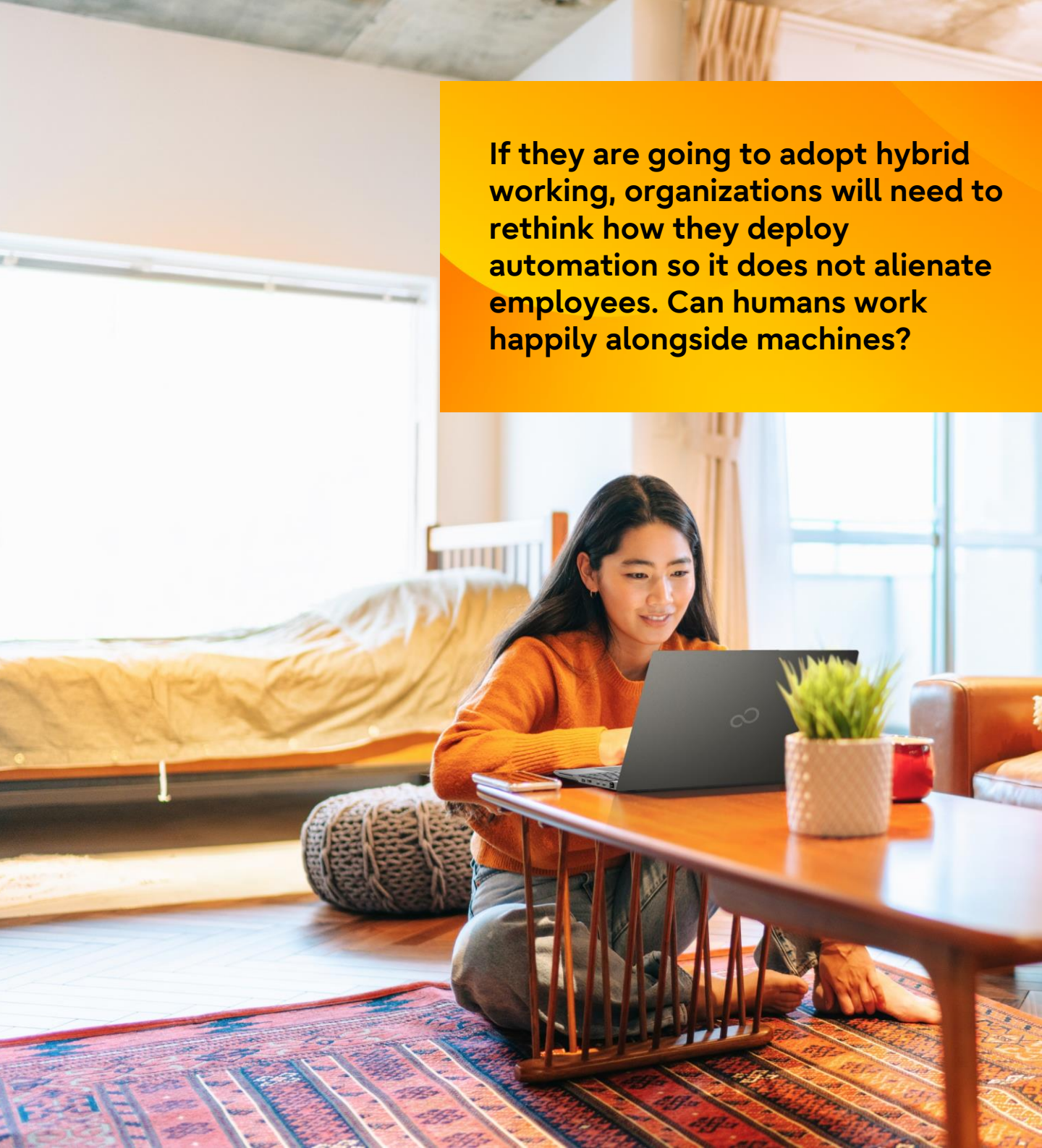


How automation can be good for employees

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If they are going to adopt hybrid working, organizations will need to rethink how they deploy automation so it does not alienate employees. Can humans work happily alongside machines?

How automation can be good for employees

What makes the employee experience great? The answer to that question may lie in automation as organizations remake their workplaces for a world permanently changed by Covid-19. Many organizations survived the disruptions by automating high-volume, low-complexity tasks; now, they want to see what else automation can do.

In a [Fujitsu survey](#), 67 percent of organizations say that automation will be critical for facilitating new ways of operating in a hybrid working environment, which is set to become more common in a post-pandemic world. About half of the survey respondents are already using automation-related technologies to help employees do some tasks remotely, and research by Deloitte finds that 23 percent of workers have seen their roles and ways of working change as a result of automation.

But there is a problem. Too many employees are not being included in this automation-led transformation — and that could leave them feeling alienated. Automation promises organizations a competitive advantage, but they need to reconsider the human factor: how will it affect employees, their careers and the way they work? And how can organizations make the most of the technology while also ensuring that employees can thrive?

Change perceptions of automation

The rise of automation in the workforce has been divisive. Its detractors say it could lead to the displacement of workers; proponents say it could transform jobs for the better.

Much of this tension comes down to the lack of clarity given to those whose lives will be directly affected by automation, which has led to fear around its adoption. Just 58 percent of organizations in the Fujitsu research say that employees are always consulted and involved in the development and implementation of automation. That means more than four in 10 organizations are not involving their workforces in the implementation of automation, which leaves employees in the dark about the potential implications for their careers.

To reverse this trend, organizations need to crowdsource: engage with each individual employee by seeking input and feedback from them at each stage of the automation process. Employees do not need to become high-level developers skilled in implementing the automation itself, but they can have power over how automation is used in their roles.

Education has to be part of this approach. According to Shail Khiyara, intelligent automation and digital transformation executive, former CMO and chief customer officer at Automation Anywhere, Blue Prism and UiPath, that means giving employees the opportunity to spend 10–15 percent of their time each week learning how automation is going to affect their roles, and finding ways to improve productivity. Involving employees in the automation process is an opportunity to develop “digital employees” who are prepared to address the growing needs of the digital customer, he explains.

It also gives employees the chance to experience the benefits for themselves. “Artificial intelligence (AI) technologies support employees by automating low-complexity, high-volume work so they can focus on what humans do best — creative problem-solving and delivering great human experiences,” says Vijay Narayanan, SVP engineering and chief AI officer at ServiceNow. “Automation technologies, such as AI-powered chat bots and search, along with intelligent workflows, empower enterprise functions such as IT, HR, Finance, Facilities and others to quickly and efficiently address a wide spectrum of employee requests in our rapidly evolving world of work.”

Ultimately, such initiatives should be part of a wider culture shift. The topic of culture transformation within organizations is becoming “more and more prominent” in the context of automation, according to Khiyara. What each organizational culture needs, he says, is an “automation champion” who can clearly communicate the role played by automation while cultivating a shared vision of how employees can work with it.

“It all starts with the champion,” he says. “They are the catalyst and driving force behind cultural transformation and the meticulous selection of automation technologies that are aligned to the business.”

Is reskilling the new recruitment?

To dispel fears and exploit automation to the full, organizations will also have to invest in developing employees' careers.

"There is a human side to automation that often does not get addressed," says Khiyara. "It is how people change careers, how their jobs change positively, how they move from menial tasks to higher-order tasks. Talent reskilling is the new talent acquisition, and executives need to get their heads around that. Reskilling can be the next big organizational differentiator."

This means creating a continuous learning journey: employees should be reskilled throughout their career at a company — not just once.

Does this mean that all workers need to learn about the code and systems that support automation? Not according to Jens Pistorius, chief executive officer at Australian automation firm Incepto. The rise of so-called low-code or no-code development platforms, he says, means that employees can continue to drive performance and growth without needing to be program developers.

Instead, Pistorius says, employees just need to understand the handover points where the work of machines — the "digital workers" — ends, and the work of humans begins.

"The digital worker starts something and then runs into a situation where it doesn't know what to do," he says. "Now, it needs to be handed over to a human worker who continues the process. That is a new concept, and having an understanding of that would clearly help the worker of tomorrow."



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Rethink how and what you automate

When it comes to the technology itself, real success will come when it is deployed with care: just because something can be automated, it does not mean it should be. “Sometimes you have processes that you could automate, and you might save money on that,” says Pistorius. “But automating them could damage your reputation and could negatively affect your workforce.”

Following the Pareto rule can help organizations to understand the role of automation in workforce productivity, according to Pistorius. Also known as the 80/20 rule, this is the idea that a small quantity of work or resources can produce a large number of results. Or, in a workforce context, that 80 percent of the value generated by employees comes from just 20 percent of their work. To maximize employee productivity, organizations should aim to automate the 80 percent that is not adding much value.

“This gives a person the feeling of ownership,” says Pistorius. “They are still important for this particular business process, because they look after those 20 percent of special cases that the robot cannot do.”

How organizations automate processes is also important. When processes change, human workers can adapt in real time. But automated processes need regular reviews, and employees’ expertise can ensure that those 80 percent of processes that are automated continue to be relevant.

Humans and machines therefore need to work side by side to maximize the value of automation. Pistorius explains that organizations can retrain for automation with the help of humans and AI; he calls this “supervised learning”. “Supervised learning means we have a person reviewing decisions that have been made by a machine learning model,” he says. “And then the human can fine-tune or adjust these decisions to be better next time.”

This approach ensures that humans and machines can automate together. For employees, this means they have the power to shape their careers; for employers, a more engaged and innovative workforce. So it is not impossible: organizations can deploy automation without fear as long as they consider the human factor.