

Technology impacts on quality of work in Canada

**PARTNERS**

ICTC Canada

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Executive Summary

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a rapid increase in the adoption of digital technologies, leading to significant disruptions across work and society. This unprecedented situation brought about fundamental changes to the nature of work.

The role of technology in the world of work is only anticipated to intensify in the coming years. And while technology offers considerable promise, there are a number of risks associated with the onset of alternative forms of work, including remote work, gig work and the sharing economy. In particular, there are concerns about the net benefits of these developments and whether the quality of work is deteriorating, notably among equity seeking groups who tend to be over-represented in alternative forms of work.

The project summarized what is known about the intersection of technology and quality of work in Canada, identifying key trends including:

Equity-deserving groups are over-represented in gig work, leading to acute vulnerabilities of these workers.

Increased flexibility that technology brings can worsen work quality if not combined with the right to disconnect for workers.

The capacity for employer surveillance enabled through increasing digitalization can negatively affect work quality.

KEY INSIGHTS

Technology deployment in the workplace should be done in a human-centric and participatory manner, with the consent and involvement of those affected.

Remote work brings much needed flexibility to workers but can blur the line between professional and personal time, eroding work quality. Policies that ensure the right to disconnect can help to mitigate these downside risks and improve the quality of work.

Equity-deserving groups are often over-represented in jobs most vulnerable to technological change. As such, examining the impacts of technology through the lens of equity, diversity and inclusion is critical to understanding the implications on the quality of work.

The Issue

Technological advancements are having a profoundly effect on the world of work, creating new employment opportunities while altering the structure and composition of tasks across jobs and sectors.

At the same time, the emergence of new technologies is affecting the quality of work, bringing both opportunities such as flexibility, while raising concerns about other aspects of work including access to certain benefits and rights.

This research investigated the intersection of employment and technology to better understand how the quality of work is being affected by advances in technology.



What We Investigated

This project sought to increase the AI knowledge and skills of professionals working in Canada, with the hThis project conducted a review of the literature and 15 key informant interviews on technology and quality of work in Canada.

The project set out to answer:

What efforts are needed to address the challenges faced by equity-deserving groups?

How is technology affecting worker well-being?

What technologies are particularly disruptive in this context?

What skills, competencies and supports are needed to help workers adjust to these changes?

What We're Learning

At the end of this project, partners had developed nine MOOCs on six different topics and more than 3, The literature review and key informant interviews identified that growing digital technology usage – accelerated by the pandemic – is altering the quality of work for Canadians in numerous ways and offers both opportunities and challenges for worker well-being.

Advanced digital technologies such as AI are being adopted into the workplace and have the potential to drastically alter tasks and employee roles. While it is difficult to know what jobs are ultimately at risk, there is a need for workers to focus on building and refining human skills and competencies that cannot be easily replicated or automated.

Technology-enabled remote and hybrid work has provided great benefits for employees, including increased flexibility in work location and work hours. However, remote work may also contribute to undesired outcomes like difficulty disconnecting from work or lower levels of social connection and trust among co-workers.

Digital adoption and automation can create opportunities for more meaningful work across the board. If managed well, automation can help workers concentrate on fulfilling and meaningful work rather than arduous or repetitive tasks. In some cases, this can also help workers feel more empowered and find meaning in their work.

Technology in the workplace, especially with remote work, raises risks of increased surveillance. Reduced privacy and invasive digital monitoring tools can lead to diminished psychological safety among workers. In some cases, surveillance may be tied to software that encourages employees to perform certain tasks or meet performance objectives, which could either be helpful or reduce autonomy, depending on how it is used. For example, AI-driven call-center software can analyze conversations with customers and provide guidance to help sell new offerings and track on-the-job performance.

Technology is ultimately changing employment relationships and expectations. One example is the growing trend of digitally enabled freelance and gig work. While freelance or gig work offers benefits like flexibility and the freedom to choose between projects, drawbacks include a lack of benefits, unreliable income and unpredictable working hours.

Why It Matters

Advances in technology and their adoption in the workplace are only going to intensify in the future. Pandemic-induced changes like physical distancing and the widespread use of remote and hybrid work have only accelerated the role of technology in the workplace.

Stakeholders interested in better understanding the impact of recent technological change on work in Canada can use the results of this project as an input for decision making related to strategy and programs.

What's Next

This project is part of Future Skills Centre's Quality of Work series, which explores different dimensions of quality work and how these dimensions interact with current challenges in the labour market, including skills and labour shortages across sectors. Part of a comprehensive strategy to improve the quality of work for individuals will entail ensuring that workers in vulnerable employment situations have access to similar rights and benefits as other workers, like employment insurance or the right to disconnect, and to provide access to upskilling and reskilling initiatives so that individuals can access improved employment opportunities in other occupations and sectors.

The Quality of Work series explores current practice related to compensation and benefits, employment security, work environment, professional growth and overall social environment, for workers, employers and policy makers. FSC has funded research initiatives that address key gaps in policy and practice related to quality of work issues in the Canadian context. FSC is working with funded partners to generate insights across the projects, that will be shared later in 2023.

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