

Rapid growth of automation threatening jobs in Canada: report

BY DAVID HODGES ~ THE CANADIAN PRESS

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TORONTO – A new report suggests the speed of technological advances has become so rapid that it's outpacing the rate at which large Canadian businesses and government institutions can adapt, with the number of jobs [threatened by automation](#) ranging from 35 to 42 per cent.

The co-authored report, by Deloitte and the Human Resources Professionals Association, calls upon policy-makers and business leaders to prepare Canadian workers for the disruption that artificial intelligence, machine learning and other technologies are having on the economy.

“The changes we are seeing are nothing less than historic and governments and educators need to take a skills-first, not a job-first approach,” said Scott Allinson, vice-president of public affairs at the HRP.

“Technology just seems to be outpacing the current business model,” added Allinson, pointing to last week's announcement by Sears Canada that the retailer was shutting down its 130 remaining stores, leaving about 12,000 employees without a job.

“We've seen with the brick-and-mortar stores that they're not keeping up with the change of what people are looking for, thanks to technology.”

Reforming education to ensure Canadians enter the workforce with the future-proofed skills they need to succeed in a digital world are among the key recommendations in the joint report.

It says this would require re-examining how schools are organized, with greater emphasis placed on interdisciplinary work, mental agility, critical thinking, teamwork, relationship management, and the capacity to learn itself – “in other words, coaching the integrated capabilities needed for the future instead of teaching individual subjects.”

With workers today needing to upgrade their capabilities constantly, the report also calls upon businesses to take a leadership role in promoting “future-proofed capabilities” by replacing static learning and development programs with dynamic, continuous learning opportunities.

Among the ways this could be achieved would include making learning available on-demand, 24/7 to all employees on any digital platform: computer, tablet or smartphone. Employers that don’t offer these off-site, virtual learning opportunities will find it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain top talent, the report says.

Another key recommendation is modernizing provincial labour laws and the social safety net to reflect the realities of the “gig economy” – which has turned the traditional one job/one employee/one employer model on its head, with pioneers like Uber and Airbnb doing away with large, hierarchical organizational structures altogether.

The report says that since 1997, Canada’s contingent workforce has grown from 4.8 million to 6.1 million and now accounts for about one-third of all jobs – and is likely to keep growing.

While Ontario has been debating reforms to raise the minimum wage and improve the labour market, Allinson says that policy-makers across the country need to design solutions that reflect both the opportunities and the challenges facing gig-economy workers as well as free-agent employees in traditional companies. This includes significant reform to the way Canadian public policy approaches retirement planning, income taxes and unemployment insurance.

“We need to get down to the urgent work of assessing not just how work will change in Canada but how Canadian workers should prepare,” said Allinson.