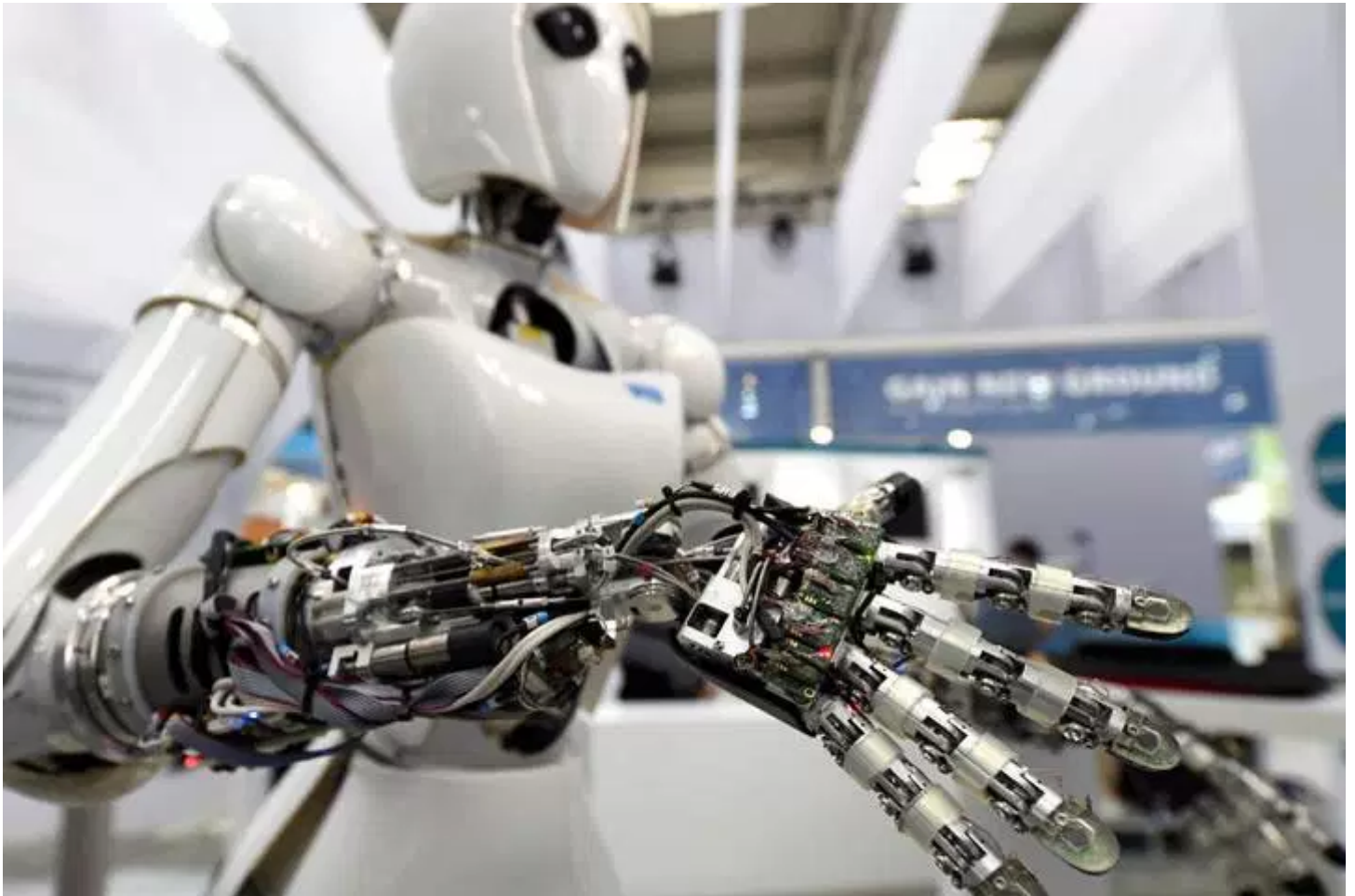


Federal government warned about robots taking more Canadian jobs

By Jordan Press The Canadian Press



A robot is displayed at the Robotics Innovation Center booth during preparations at the CeBit computer fair, which will open its doors to the public on March 20, at the fairground in Hanover, Germany, March 18, 2017.

REUTERS/Fabian Bimmer

Federal officials were warned over the summer that machines are going to replace more jobs in the workforce in the coming years and that will require a rethink of how government helps the unemployed.

Documents prepared for top officials at Employment and Social Development Canada don't hint at how federal policy will have to adapt to increased automation in the workforce, noting that predicting the future is a risky proposition.

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Experts say what's missing from the documents is any hint of concern that the rise of the machines is an immediate concern that the government must quickly address.

"Many of the trends that may concern us about technology and automation in terms of what their impacts could be on workers are already happening and that's, I think, the missing piece here," said Sunil Johal, policy director with the Mowat Centre at the University of Toronto.

"People are projecting this into, well, in 10 years we may be in a difficult situation."

"The reality is many Canadians are already ill-served by government policies when it comes to skills training, when it comes to employment insurance, when it comes to the broader suite of public services to support

Canadians."

Depending on the methodology used, the Canadian economy could lose between 1.5 million and 7.5 million jobs in the coming years due to automation.

The jobs at the most risk are those that require repetitive activities like an automotive assembly line, although even some high-skilled workers, such as financial advisers, are already being replaced by software programs. The documents also note that journalists could see themselves increasingly replaced by robots.

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One industry source, who spoke on condition of anonymity in order to discuss private conversations, said senior government officials acknowledge automation is something they have to deal with, but likely not for decades. The source said that senior officials believe new jobs will be created to keep people working.

The documents say new jobs will be created because that's just the way the economy works: As technology kills jobs, it also creates new ones. The issue, the documents say, is that no one knows if enough jobs will be created to replace those lost, nor if they will all be as well-paid.

“Predicting the future brings significant risk,” reads part of a presentation released to The Canadian Press under the Access to Information Act.

“We cannot know what future jobs will be created or whether enough of them will be created to offset displaced workers or whether automation will offset the pressures arising from slowing labour force growth.”

The rest of the slide has been blacked out because it contains sensitive advice on future policy paths.

The Liberals are telegraphing that they will make skills training services a focus of Wednesday’s budget. Once the budget puts a dollar figure on the federal contribution to training, negotiations with provinces and territories on the main funding vehicle for the cash – the labour market development agreements – can be finalized.

In a paper he co-wrote last year, Johal argued that the government also needs to look at expanding access to existing training programs, create targeted programs and labour market protections like minimum wage rules for independent contractors and look at introducing emergency lines of credit for people who need a short-term financial boost.

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Labour Minister Patty Hajdu said the government is looking to find a way to help sectors who are short of workers, and guide people into emerging fields.

“Successful economies and countries are ones that can be adaptive and that’s why skills development is so important,” Hajdu said in an interview.

“I’m excited about being able to do that work and help people gain those skills for the shortages that we have in specific sectors and to help support that innovation agenda that really is about fostering creativity and being thoughtful and deliberate about what skills we’re training people for.”

– *With files from Andy Blatchford*

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