

# Robot-phobia could exasperate hotel, restaurant labor shortage

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Using more robots to close labor gaps in the hospitality industry may backfire and cause more human workers to quit, according to a Washington State University study.

The study, involving more than 620 lodging and food service employees, found that "robot-phobia"—specifically the fear that robots and technology will take human jobs—increased workers' job insecurity and stress, leading to greater intentions to leave their jobs. The impact was more pronounced with employees who had real experience working with [robotic technology](#). It also affected managers in addition to frontline workers.

The findings were published in the [\*International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management\*](#).

"The turnover rate in the hospitality industry ranks among the highest across all non-farm sectors, so this is an issue that companies need to take seriously," said lead author Bamboo Chen, a hospitality researcher in WSU's Carson College of Business.

"The findings seem to be consistent across sectors and across both frontline employees and managers. For everyone, regardless of their position or sector, robot-phobia has a real impact."

Food service and lodging industries were hit particularly hard by the pandemic lockdowns, and many businesses are still struggling to find enough workers. For example, the accommodation workforce in April 2024 was still 9.2% below what it was in February 2020, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The ongoing labor shortage has inspired some employers to turn to robotic technology to fill the gap.

While other studies have focused on customers' comfort with robots, this study focuses on how the technology impacted hospitality workers. Chen and WSU colleague Ruying Cai surveyed 321 lodging and 308 [food service](#) employees from across the U.S., asking a range of questions about their jobs and attitudes toward robots.

The survey defined "robots" broadly to include a range of robotic and automation technologies, such as human-like robot servers and automated robotic arms as well as self-service kiosks and tabletop devices.

Analyzing the [survey data](#), the researchers found that having a higher degree of robot-phobia was connected to greater feelings of job insecurity and stress—which were then correlated with "turnover intention" or workers' plans to leave their jobs. Those fears did not decrease with familiarity: employees who had more actual engagement with robotic technology in their daily jobs had higher fears that it would make [human workers](#) obsolete.

Perception also played a role. The employees who viewed robots as being more capable and efficient also ranked higher in turnover intention.

Robots and automation can be good ways to help augment service, Chen said, as they can handle tedious tasks humans typically do not like doing such as washing dishes or handling loads of hotel laundry. But the danger comes if the robotic additions cause more human workers to quit. The authors point out this can create a "[negative feedback loop](#)" that can make the hospitality labor shortage worse.

Chen recommended that employers communicate not only the benefits but the limitations of the technology—and place a particular emphasis on the role human workers play.

"When you're introducing a new technology, make sure not to focus just on how good or efficient it will be. Instead, focus on how people and the technology can work together," he said.

**More information:** Chun-Chu (Bamboo) Chen et al, Are robots

stealing our jobs? Examining robot-phobia as a job stressor in the hospitality workplace, *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* (2024). [DOI: 10.1108/IJCHM-09-2023-1454](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-09-2023-1454)

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