

Australian workers are invisible bystanders in the adoption of AI, study finds

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A major Australian [study](#) of worker experience of AI has found workers are being ignored in the development of new tools and processes, leaving them, their employers, and the broader public exposed to increased risks

and missed opportunities.

The qualitative research engaged workers in nursing, retail and the Australian Public Sector. It was conducted by the University of Technology Sydney's Human Technology Institute (HTI) in partnership with Essential Research as part of HTI's AI Corporate Governance Program.

The study found low levels of worker engagement in workplace automation and significant concerns about the impact of AI and automation on work quality and outcomes for patients, customers, and citizens.

Key findings in the research include:

- Nurses have deep concerns about the impact of automated decisions on [patient care](#), such as the dispensing of drugs and triage diagnosis.
- There is deeply held skepticism about AI among public servants, where both trust and social license have been undermined by Robodebt.
- Retail workers see automation in the form of self-managed checkouts working against their interests while increasing customer frustration.
- Even when workers have a low initial understanding of AI systems, they are quickly able to provide valuable and nuanced insights into ethical, operational and strategic issues.

HTI Co-Director Professor Nicholas Davis said the research is among the first to take workers on a reflective journey around the impact of AI, and has led to significant findings.

"The research finds workers are not opposed to AI. In fact, they see

opportunities for improving many parts of their work, especially around reducing the burden of menial, repetitive tasks," Professor Davis said.

"But the study also shows that workers are a source of deep yet underutilized expertise around how AI tools can be used both productively and responsibly."

The study was conducted in the context of recent research by leading economists that shows that technology-led and automation-focused AI adoption can simultaneously harm workers, disappoint investors and damage the economy.

Professor Davis points out, "Our research provides further evidence that, if companies continue to treat workers as invisible bystanders, AI investments will result in 'so-so automation' that displaces employees without increasing productivity."

"Organizations urgently need to harness a critical yet overlooked asset in driving innovation and productivity: workers."

The report calls for workers' voices to be embedded in the development and deployment of AI systems across Australia. This could include:

- Establishing of industry-wide AI works council.
- Imposing a general duty of care on organizations around AI equivalent to [workplace safety](#) obligations.
- Developing industrial guardrails akin to minimum nurse-to-patient ratios.
- Reforms that establish clear boundaries on worker surveillance.

More information: Study: [Invisible bystanders: How Australian workers experience the uptake of AI and automation](#)

Provided by University of Technology, Sydney

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