
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Will robots take our jobs?



NB: This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English. I'm Neil...

Finn

... and I'm Finn. Hello.

Neil

Hello there, Finn. Now, what do you know about robots?

Finn

Robots? Well, (Finn does an impression of a robot voice) they talk in a funny way... like that!

Neil

Yes. You sound quite convincing there actually, Finn.

Finn

Do you like it?

Neil

Yes, I do. Is there anything else you know about robots?

Finn

Well, there are... there are a couple of good ones in the Star Wars, aren't there?

Neil

Oh, yes. R2-D2 and C-3PO. C-3PO talks in quite a human voice.

Finn

He does. But of course that's science fiction not real life.

Neil

No. But things have moved on in real life. The use of machines to do work that people do or used to do is called **automation** and that's the subject of today's show.

Finn

But before we talk more about this, I'd like you, Neil, to answer today's quiz question. What makes a job more likely to be done by robots? Is it if a job involves...

- a) manipulating small objects?
- b) working in open spaces?
- Or c) social and emotional skills?

Neil

Hmm... OK. Well, I'm going to guess. Manipulating small objects, I think.

Finn

Interesting. OK, we'll find out if you're right or wrong later on. Now, two UK academics have calculated how **susceptible to** – that means likely to be affected by – how susceptible to automation each job is based on some key skills. And these include negotiation, persuasion, caring for others, originality, and **manual dexterity** – now that means being good with your hands.

Neil

So do you think intelligent machines could replace us?

Finn

Well, maybe you, Neil. Not me, no. I have all the key skills you know – I'm original... persuasive... of course very caring and very good with my hands as well, I think.

Neil

Well I'm very glad that you're safe, Finn!

Finn

Thank you.

Neil

However, a study from Oxford University has suggested that 35% of existing UK jobs are being automated in the next 20 years. Let's listen to Michael Osborne from Oxford University talking about this.

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Michael Osborne, University of Oxford

Computers are increasingly able to learn in a way that in short has been a reserve of human beings. So in their ability to learn, computers are able to perform a much wider range of tasks than they've been able to do in the past. So as a result it's not just manual labour that's coming under threat of automation. It's increasingly cognitive labour – the labour of the mind.

Finn

Michael Osborne. And **cognitive labour** means using your **noggin** – that’s using or head! So computers and machines are using their noggins and getting smarter. And office workers who do repetitive jobs such as drawing up spreadsheets could be replaced with software. But surely jobs like being a doctor or a lawyer are safe, Neil?

Neil

Well, some white-collar jobs may be less safe than you think. At one city law firm junior staff have to read through contracts, assessing them for risks. But now an artificial intelligence programme can do that faster and better.

Finn

So **white collar** refers to a job that you do at an office rather than a factory. And **artificial intelligence** refers to a computer’s ability to copy intelligent human behaviour. Now let’s listen to Matthew Whalley from a city law firm to find out what he thinks.

INSERT

Matthew Whalley, Berwin Leighton Paisner

What you’re seeing the robot do now, the robot can do in three seconds what would take a group of lawyers days to do. And the advantage is that it can do huge volumes, incredibly reliably in unbelievable times. There is a huge amount of this work to do and lawyers have far better higher-value legal analysis to worry about.

Neil

Well he thinks that there is work for the lawyers and the computers. In fact it sounds like a good division of labour – the computers do the boring stuff and the lawyers do the more interesting work!

Finn

Yes. Well, let’s keep our fingers crossed that we’ve got good prospects. You know, I don’t want our listeners to (robot voice) start listening to robot presenters any time soon!

Neil

Indeed, we need! We talk about **keeping our fingers crossed** when we hope that things are going to turn out in the way we want them to in the future.

Finn

That’s right. So shall we hear the answer to today’s quiz question? Neil, I asked you: What makes a job more likely to be done by robots? Is it if a job involves... a) manipulating small objects? b) working in open spaces? Or c) social and emotional skills?

Neil

Well, I said a) manipulating small objects ... and I’m keeping my fingers crossed that I’ve got the right answer.

Finn

OK. You're keeping them crossed?

Neil

Yes, I am.

Finn

You've got the answer right! Well done!

Neil

Brilliant! I'm glad my cognitive skills are still functioning. Now, how about hearing those words again?

Finn

OK, the words we heard today were:

automation

susceptible to

manual dexterity

cognitive labour

noggin

white collar

artificial intelligence (AI)

and ... keeping your fingers crossed

Neil

Well, that brings us to the end of this 6 Minute English. We hope you enjoyed the programme. Please join us again soon.

Both

Bye.

Vocabulary

automation

the use of machines to do work that people do or used to do

susceptible to

likely to be affected by

manual dexterity

good with your hands

cognitive labour

using your mind to perform a task

noggin

head (informal)

white collar

a job you do at an office rather than a factory

artificial intelligence (AI)

a computer's ability to copy intelligent human behaviour

keeping your fingers crossed

hoping that things are going to turn out the way you want them to

