



Technological change with workers in mind:

Policy Briefing

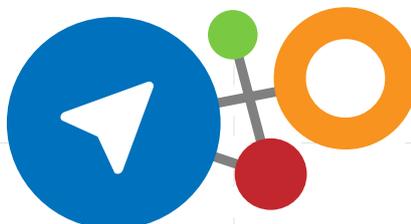
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This Policy Brief presents key findings from the first large-scale qualitative study to uniquely examine the ways in which UK hospitality workplaces navigate technological transformation.

Funded by the British Academy, the study involved conducting 65 interviews with hospitality workers, employers, managers, technologists and industry experts about their experiences, perspectives and implications of technological change.

This briefing offers recommendations for policymakers on how to create impactful policies that acknowledge the growing role of technology in shaping the future of work and society, minimise the negative workforce impacts resulting from change, anticipate wider societal implications and facilitate positive change for all.

Understanding the implications of technological change – and how it intersects with other sectoral and structural challenges – should be at the heart of any policy and practice efforts for making hospitality workplaces fairer, more sustainable and more worker-considerate.



Key Findings

Hospitality workers value workplace interactions

Workers value the opportunity to interact with customers. This gives them meaning and brings joy. However, interactions with customers are becoming increasingly mediated, reduced or replaced, by technological solutions (e.g. self-check-in kiosks, in-app messaging). This can make work experiences less personalised and leave workers feeling disconnected from their customers, and therefore less satisfied with their jobs.



Technology can amplify anxiety

Workers reported anxiety about new systems being introduced or upgraded, and worried about how this would affect their work. They were often advised late about the changes and felt unprepared. This anxiety was felt by younger as well as older workers, with employers either under or over-estimating workers skills and preparedness in relation to adopting new technological practices.

Competition for jobs is rising

Workers do worry about new technologies taking their jobs away or reducing the number of staff on shift, more than they let on. Self-ordering solutions and self-check-in systems can make staff more alert about the future implications for their roles. Workers show a good level of critical awareness and reflection, with many being concerned about a decrease in staff on shift.

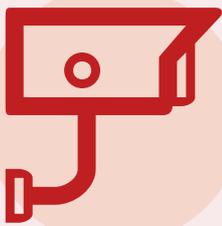


Work is intensifying

Workers are absorbing more work. While technology is meant to introduce efficiencies, workers report having more, and not less, work to do, and work is becoming more intense. This increased pressure felt by workers affects their well-being and increases stress.

Tech-related issues absorb more work time

Workers spend more time solving tech-related problems. While new technology is promised to free workers' time and allow them more time for interacting with customers, the opposite is often felt, as workers spend a lot of time solving issues caused by the technology, and as a result have less time to spend with customers.

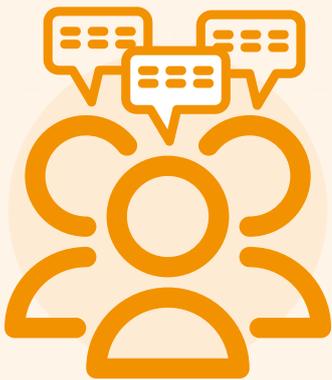


Workplace monitoring causes additional pressure

Workers are concerned about the use of metrics and customer reviews to monitor and manage their performance. This affects job satisfaction and decreases their sense of autonomy, while increasing insecurity.

Not all technologies are useful and fit for purpose

While there were tools that supported workers well and simplified their work, not all technological solutions were useful and adapted to the needs of their workplace. Many tools were not integrated well within current systems or not adapted to the needs of hospitality workplaces, resulting in more manual work and time spent consolidating information across systems, and correcting errors. Workers felt pressured to use tools they did not feel worked well.



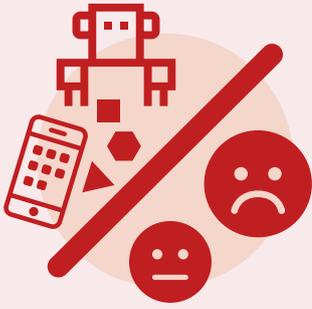
Communication with co-workers and managers is becoming more digitally mediated

While workers appreciated the digital communication tools used at work and acknowledged that these tools helped them gain access to important information (e.g. work schedules), they also reported that online communication was sometimes overused and replaced important face-to-face comms between workers and managers, making workers feel less integrated within the team. Workers deemed some topics (e.g. discussing customer complaints) inappropriate for posting on group chats and better dealt with in person.

Assumptions are made about technological readiness of workers

Workers, both younger and older, reported limited preparation for technological change. Many received insufficient training and thought that e-learning, while useful to a certain extent, cannot replace in-person training. There was a willingness among workers to gain new skills.



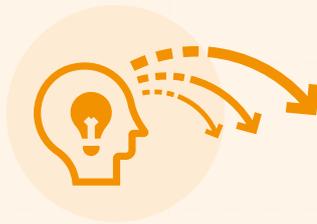
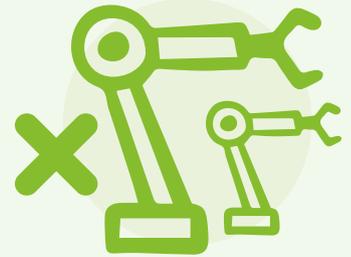


Workers can feel excluded from the process of bringing in new technologies

Workers did not feel they were consulted about the changes or that their feedback was listened to. They did not feel comfortable reporting tech issues as they did not think it would be taken seriously. They felt that the expectation was to just get on with it, rather than having conversations about the implementation of new technologies.

Jobs with too much automation are perceived as less attractive

While many workers appreciated the new technologies they used at work, they were discouraged from applying for jobs where too much automation was in place. They appreciated having technology that supported them rather than intensified their work and created more stress. Some purposely sought jobs with minimal technology (e.g. local pub) and appreciated interactions with co-workers and regulars, arguing that more automation meant less commitment and disconnection.

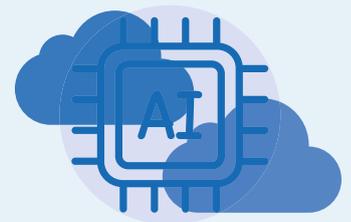


Too much automation can lead to a loss of skills

Certain skills, such as barista skills or chef skills, are at risk of being too automated in pursuit of standardisation and as a result being lost. Workers argued that customers appreciated individualised services and products over standardisation.

More clarity is needed around AI use

While some workers used AI at work and were encouraged to use it (e.g. in reservations for email templates), many were less aware of its use. Some used GenAI at work without declaring to employers, as they were unsure about the privacy and data protection. Workers were unsure about the usefulness of AI and wanted clearer guidance from employers.



Different groups of workers react differently to technology

Younger and university-educated workers showed more confidence and enthusiasm about technology. However, they also showed critical awareness of negative impacts and implications, and valued workplace interactions. Older and neurodiverse workers were considered as those who adapt more slowly and as those who might feel more alienated due to new technologies, and in need of more support.

Recommendations for government and policymakers

- Taking into consideration the wider socio-economic context of contemporary post-Brexit Britain as well as longstanding structural issues in hospitality workplaces, the below recommendations necessarily focus both on technological transformation and more general policy recommendations.
- The complex situation that the UK economy, workers and hospitality workplaces are in requires a holistic approach where specific technology-related policies exist alongside policies addressing existing wider structural inequalities and socio-economic challenges. This is not only about regulating the use of technologies but also improving working conditions in the service sector, while acknowledging the growing role of technology in shaping the future of work and society, and anticipating wider societal implications.
- The role of technology in shaping the future of work and working conditions can have significant compounding societal consequences. To truly reap the benefits of technological transformation – and minimise the negative impacts resulting from change – requires not only improving working conditions, protecting jobs and supporting the hospitality sector during its current crisis, but also ensuring adequate regulation of new technological innovations in workplaces and acknowledgement of impacts on workers.

1. The hospitality sector is in need of greater and sector-specific government support.

The hospitality sector is in crisis, with many jobs disappearing and businesses closing. Yet, the sector plays an important role in supporting local economies and communities, providing jobs for millions of workers, in particular young people, and offering third spaces for people to socialise. There is a need to acknowledge the value of the hospitality sector and its societal role, and to recognise

its importance in creating jobs, supporting local economies and less privileged workers who rely on hospitality jobs. This will require strong sector-specific policies and packages that protect the industry (e.g. reduction in business rates) (Institute of Hospitality, 2025) in order to reduce the uncertainty in the sector, incentivise job creation and encourage the implementation of good work initiatives that enable employers to prioritise working conditions over technological innovation.

2. Worker protection policies need to prioritise the least advantaged workers in hospitality.

Many hospitality workers can be considered vulnerable. They are often excluded from other sectors and are thus over-reliant on hospitality for providing jobs. Compared with other sectors, hospitality has high proportions of younger workers, foreign-born, part-time workers and workers from minority ethnic backgrounds (Murray, 2026). For the societal good, it is imperative for the UK government to monitor hospitality job losses among less privileged workers, determine the factors contributing to these, and account for technology-related impacts. This means policies providing greater protection for the most vulnerable workers to ensure thriving local communities and local economies, and a longer-term reduction in social deprivation.

3. A greater focus is needed on creating meaningful quality jobs for young people and not only jobs that fill the gaps technology cannot.

Young people depend on hospitality jobs for a variety of reasons, including to support themselves while at university (Rydzik and Bal, 2023). Job losses in hospitality (and beyond) are significantly affecting young workers, with further entry-level job losses anticipated to affect young workers due to perceived AI-

related efficiencies (Partridge, 2025). This requires closer monitoring of hospitality job losses among young workers, in particular in relation to new technologies, and designing policies to address technology-induced job dislocation. The government commissioned Alan Milburn Review (McFadden, 2025) into rising inactivity among young people should also consider the impact of technological change and specifically address job losses in hospitality. Employers need to be encouraged to create roles for and better support young people with transitioning into the world of work (Rydzik and Kissoon, 2022).

4. There needs to be a genuine commitment to prioritising fair work and an honest acknowledgement of the role of technology in shaping working conditions.

Hospitality roles enable workers to develop a range of skills, despite often pressurised working environments and misplaced assumptions about hospitality jobs being lower-skilled. Findings from this study show that workers value hospitality jobs for providing opportunities for interaction and social connectedness, giving them meaning and providing joy. Despite perceptions of hospitality jobs being transient, many workers spend their working lives in the sector and develop long-term careers. At the same time, there is a need to improve working conditions in hospitality and address issues of safety, precarity and exploitation engrained in many hospitality jobs. Replacing jobs that thousands of workers rely on with new technologies is not a solution to the problem of poor working conditions. Rather than replacing workers with new technologies, there is a need for the government to ensure decent work opportunities, in this way addressing structural inequalities and the negative impact work can have on workers and their well-being.

It is critical to carefully consider technology as a mediating factor and monitor the ways in which new technologies are reshaping

the nature of hospitality work, affecting working conditions, workplace relations and impacting worker wellbeing in order to avoid exacerbating inequalities, widening societal gaps and worsening working conditions through technology-originated alienation and intensification of work. This means acknowledging that technological innovations play an important role in affecting work and workplace relations, and designing policies to monitor this.

With the new Fair Work Agency being established in 2026 (Department for Business & Trade, 2025), it is important that the implications of technological change are properly considered in order to protect workers. The Employment Rights Bill has potential to positively influence the future of work and skills, and improve working conditions for less privileged workers. For hospitality, this can mean less precarious employment conditions, more attractive jobs, less staff turnover and increased job security. But it is important to consider the distinct needs and challenges of hospitality workers, and to acknowledge the growing role of technology in shaping hospitality workers' realities.

5. There is a need for properly regulating technologies in hospitality workplaces with workers in mind.

One of the aims of the Employment Rights Bill is to 'modernise the employment rights framework to suit the economy of today' (Department for Business & Trade, 2024). Technological change and its impact on workers should become one of the core dimensions. There is a need for pro-worker regulations in relation to technological transformation to strengthen worker protections and address the ways in which new technologies are negatively affecting workers. The nature of hospitality and service sector work is being reshaped through new technologies. Therefore, in consultation

with unions and workers, conceptualisations of fair work need expanding to factor in technology-infused changes, anticipate challenges, effectively monitor impacts on workers and working conditions (e.g. through impact assessments), including unintended consequences and technology-induced side effects, and mitigate these with workers' needs in mind. Workers and employers need stronger guidance to navigate technological change mindfully. Clear worker-considerate policies are needed around the use of technologies in workplaces, particularly in the service sector economy and closer collaboration with the industry is required to mitigate negative impacts.

6. There is a need for AI regulation to be more informed by AI-critical perspectives and more worker-considerate.

The Government's 2025 AI Opportunities Action Plan (Department for Science, Innovation & Technology, 2025) needs to better acknowledge the potential negative impacts of AI on workers and ensure decent protections are in place (see TUC's Artificial Intelligence (Employment and Regulation) Bill, 2024). As the hospitality industry is figuring out the ways in which AI can be more embedded in workplaces, it is important for the government to provide worker-considerate guidelines and policies on its use in workplaces and for these to be developed in consideration with workers and trade unions, anticipating potential negative consequences on service sector jobs, the most vulnerable workers and working conditions. To ensure AI tools are used in an ethical and responsible way, working with businesses and industry organisations on establishing a clear set of principles of fair and inclusive technological implementation in workplaces for employers to use is crucial and could bring benefits for all.

7. A more muscular approach to regulation is needed to ensure transparency, and ethical and

responsible use of technologies and data in workplaces.

As more technologies are being constantly introduced into hospitality workplaces, it is important that these tools are not used for worker surveillance but that employers are transparent about the use of data and the potential of tools for monitoring worker performance, with workers given adequate protections.

8. Discover and develop effective new mechanisms for hospitality worker voice and worker consultation.

Unions have been critical in examining the role of technologies, monitoring and making visible the impacts on workers (e.g. TUC, 2022, 2024, 2025) and creating worker-considerate policies in collaboration with workers and other stakeholders. While important work is being done by UNITE Hospitality, one challenge is that hospitality workers are largely non-unionised and therefore other mechanisms for including worker voice and ensuring worker consultation need to be created. More opportunities for dialogue and co-creation are needed for hospitality workers' realities and technology-induced impacts on their work to be made visible. This project aims to fill this gap in knowledge.

9. Research funding into the implications of technological change on jobs, workplaces and working conditions needs to be prioritised.

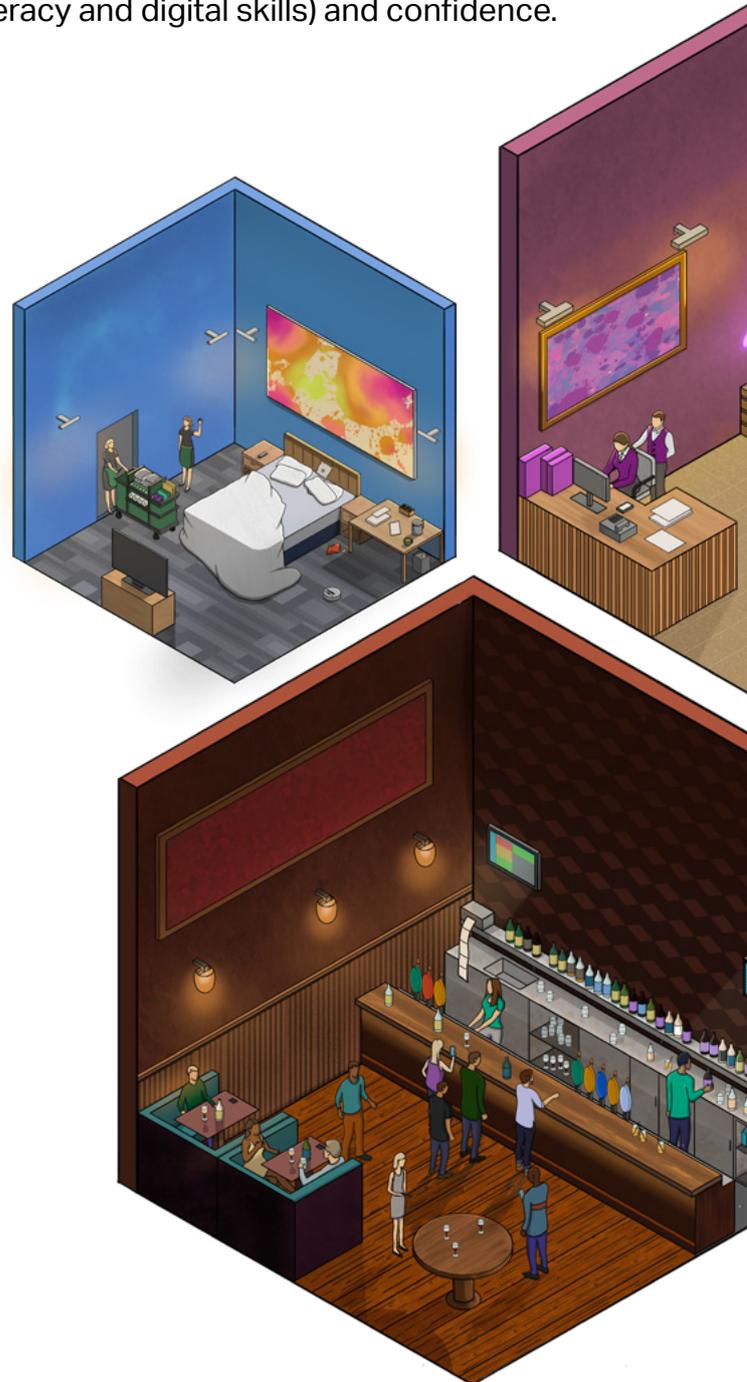
To fully acknowledge and account for the impacts of new technologies on working conditions, worker wellbeing and quality of hospitality jobs, more research needs to be commissioned into examining these. Funding more research that explores the full range of implications of technological transformation on workers can help mitigate negative impacts and avoid exacerbating workplace inequalities in the longer-term, in particular in the service economy and in the context of more precarious workers. Growing the evidence

base in this critical area can help expand knowledge and understanding of workforce and societal implications.

10. Education, skills and the future of work need to be more closely connected, with education not seen as only having a skills provider role.

Closer collaboration between policymakers, employers, young people and educational institutions is needed to prepare future workers for navigating the constantly evolving (and increasingly AI-infused) working realities and adapting to change with confidence. Critical analysis, problem solving, critical thinking and communication skills remain as important as data literacy and digital/AI skills in equipping future workers to deal with the messy realities of work (see the Institute for the Future of Work (2025) report for review on skills). Emotional intelligence, empathy and communication skills continue being important in the service sector economy but are at risk of being increasingly mediated, reduced or replaced with technology. Yet, these are key (e.g. for enhancing customer experience, keeping hospitality values within the hospitality sector) to making hospitality jobs more attractive and meaningful.

To prepare young people better for navigating technological change, future workers need to be equipped with critical analysis and thinking skills to be able to unpack technology-related issues and find meaningful ways to mitigate challenges. With generational change, and stereotyped assumptions being made about GenZ, there is a need to challenge the assumption that young people desire more technology and 'naturally' have good digital skills. It is also important to introduce training and educational schemes to prepare workers of all ages to adapt better to technological change and support them with developing a range of skills (including communication, adaptability, problem solving, as well as data literacy and digital skills) and confidence.



About the Author

Dr Agnieszka Rydzik (arydzik@lincoln.ac.uk) is an Associate Professor at the University of Lincoln. Her research focuses on technological change and the future of work; tourism and hospitality workplaces; and making workplaces more inclusive and work more meaningful. Her most recent study, funded by the British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship, explores the ways in which hospitality workplaces navigate technological change and what this means for workers and employers. This policy brief is developed based on extensive data gathered through this British Academy-funded project.



Find out more: hospitalityfutures.co.uk/reboot

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