



## THE ROLE OF UNIONS IN ADDRESSING AI-INDUCED JOB DISPLACEMENT: A REVIEW STUDY

Aliaa Diyana Zamri<sup>1\*</sup>, Siti Noorjannah Abd Halim<sup>2</sup>, Wan 'Aliaa Wan Anis<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Business and Social Sciences, Albukhary International University, Malaysia.

Email: [aliaa.zamri@aiu.edu.my](mailto:aliaa.zamri@aiu.edu.my)

<sup>2</sup> School of Business Management, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia.

Email: [sitinoorjannah@uum.edu.my](mailto:sitinoorjannah@uum.edu.my)

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Business Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia.

Email: [wanaliaa@uitm.edu.my](mailto:wanaliaa@uitm.edu.my)

\* Corresponding Author

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### Abstract:

This study examines the pivotal role of labour unions in mitigating the challenges posed by artificial intelligence (AI) and automation on job security and employee retention. As AI technologies increasingly replace human labour across various sectors, unions emerge as essential advocates for workers' rights, ensuring their inclusion in the design and implementation of these technologies. The research focuses on the relationship between perceived union effectiveness (independent variable) and employee retention (dependent variable) in AI-induced job displacement. By analysing recent studies and current union strategies, this paper highlights how effective union representation can enhance job security and facilitate workforce adaptation to technological changes. Findings show that proactive reskilling programs led by unions can increase retention by up to 64%, while ethical AI governance improves transparency and worker trust. Recommendations include collaborative training programs, adoption of AI ethics policies, and international regulatory frameworks. This review contributes to academic theory on labor relations in the AI era and offers policy implications for industry and governments.

### Keywords:

Unions, Artificial Intelligence, Employee Retention, Sectors, Job Security, Fair Compensation.

## Introduction

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into global labour markets is transforming industries at an unprecedented pace, with implications spanning manufacturing, logistics,

customer service, and healthcare (OECD, 2023; ILO, 2022). While AI promises significant improvements in efficiency and productivity, it simultaneously presents risks to employment stability, particularly for workers in roles vulnerable to automation. Recent estimates indicate that approximately 27% of jobs worldwide face high automation risks, with the financial, logistics, and manufacturing sectors among the most affected (European Commission, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2022).

Historically, labour unions have played a pivotal role in advocating for fair wages, safe working conditions, and job security. In the context of AI, their role must evolve to address emerging challenges such as workforce reskilling, algorithmic bias, and the ethical deployment of AI systems (Pulcher et al., 2019; Budhwar et al., 2023). These issues require unions to navigate complex socio-technical landscapes while ensuring equitable transitions for affected workers.

The primary objective of this study is to examine the role of unions in addressing AI-induced job displacement and promoting worker adaptation in the AI-driven economy. Specifically, it aims to: (1) identify union strategies for mitigating displacement risks, (2) evaluate the effectiveness of union-led initiatives in facilitating workforce transitions, and (3) explore the policy and governance frameworks that support ethical AI adoption in the labour market. The scope of the study covers recent scholarly literature, case studies, and policy developments from 2020 to 2025, with a focus on industries undergoing rapid automation.

By combining insights from industrial relations theory and technological displacement theory (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2022), this paper seeks to contribute to the academic discourse on the intersection of technology and labour, while offering practical recommendations for policymakers, industry leaders, and unions. In doing so, it positions unions as key actors in shaping a balanced future where technological innovation coexists with social and economic justice.

## Literature Review

### *AI and Workforce Transformation*

The transformative impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on labour markets has been the subject of extensive and growing academic inquiry, reflecting a consensus that AI adoption represents not merely an incremental technological change but a systemic reconfiguration of work structures, occupational demands, and industrial competitiveness (Sorgner, Bode, & Krieger-Boden, 2020; Susskind, 2022; Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2023). Empirical evidence from the period 2020–2024 reveals both displacement and creation effects: AI-driven automation contributed to a 23.4% decline in middle-skill employment across manufacturing, logistics, and administrative sectors (Krishna Prasanth, 2024), while simultaneously generating a 31.7% increase in employment in emergent roles such as AI development, human–AI collaboration, and digital transformation leadership (OECD, 2023). This bifurcation illustrates the “creative destruction” dynamic first theorised by Schumpeter (1942), now intensified by the unprecedented speed and scope of AI integration.

However, the net employment effect is unevenly distributed across skill categories, regions, and industries. Displaced workers face considerable barriers to reintegration, with 42% reporting that inadequate skill development programmes, limited access to affordable training, and insufficient institutional support constitute primary obstacles to re-employment (World

Economic Forum, 2023; ILO, 2022). The OECD (2023) further emphasises that countries lacking coordinated national reskilling strategies are at heightened risk of widening socioeconomic inequalities as AI adoption accelerates.

Practical examples of successful workforce transformation highlight the importance of proactive and targeted interventions. Al Yahmadi et al. (2024) detail a large-scale initiative in Oman that leveraged AI-enabled skills-gap assessments to redeploy more than 500 surplus workers into emerging sectors, aligning workforce planning with Oman's Vision 2040 economic diversification agenda. The case demonstrates how AI can serve as both a diagnostic and a strategic tool when combined with customised training curricula designed to bridge specific skill deficits. This aligns with findings by Arntz, Gregory, and Zierahn (2022), who argue that technological adaptability, rather than generic skill acquisition, is the most critical determinant of successful transitions in the face of automation.

At the policy and systemic level, Fan (2024) underscores the vulnerability of low-skilled labourers to AI-induced displacement and recommends a tripartite approach involving government bodies, industry stakeholders, and educational institutions to deliver comprehensive reskilling and upskilling programmes. Such programmes must be industry-specific, modular, and capable of rapid deployment to keep pace with technological change. The importance of these strategies is echoed in European Commission (2021) reports, which advocate for the integration of lifelong learning mechanisms into national labour policies.

In addition to displacement and reskilling challenges, AI adoption has notable implications for workplace engagement, organisational productivity, and employee well-being. Research by Gowda et.al. (2024) demonstrates that AI-driven analytics can enhance employee satisfaction and retention by automating repetitive and cognitively monotonous tasks, thereby allowing employees to engage in more creative, analytical, and strategic functions. However, these benefits are contingent on ethical and transparent deployment practices. Algorithmic decision-making, if left unregulated, can perpetuate or exacerbate existing workplace inequities, as shown in empirical studies by Raghavan et al. (2020) and Cowgill, Dell'Acqua, and Deng (2022). This duality reinforces the argument that technological governance must be embedded alongside innovation to ensure sustainable and equitable outcomes.

The role of adaptability and skill evolution in AI-integrated industries has been examined in depth by Babashahi et al. (2024), whose systematic review identifies technical competence, adaptability, and digital literacy as the triad of core competencies required for successful integration into AI-enhanced roles. Their analysis further reveals that organisations adopting a balanced approach, which invests simultaneously in technical training and ethical AI frameworks, have reported significant improvements in both productivity and employee satisfaction.

Taken together, the literature presents a nuanced view of AI's impact on the workforce: while offering unprecedented opportunities for economic growth, productivity enhancement, and job creation in emerging sectors, AI simultaneously threatens to deepen labour market segmentation if its adoption is not paired with anticipatory governance and inclusive workforce development strategies (ILO, 2022; Brynjolfsson, Rock, & Syverson, 2021). Proactive reskilling, ethical AI governance, and cross-sector collaboration emerge as recurring themes,

underscoring the need for integrated policy frameworks that ensure AI-driven transformation contributes to both economic dynamism and social equity.

**Table 1. Summary of Past Findings on AI and Workforce Transformation**

Author(s) & Year	Focus Area	Key Findings	Relevance to Present Study
Krishna Prasanth (2024)	AI & labour market impact	23.4% job loss in middle-skill sectors; 31.7% rise in AI-related jobs	Highlights displacement–creation duality; need for reskilling
OECD (2023)	Global automation risk	27% of jobs at high automation risk; 42% cite lack of training	Urgency for union-led skills development
Al Yahmadi et al. (2024)	Case study – Oman	500 workers redeployed via AI skill-gap mapping	Shows practical integration of AI & reskilling
Fan (2024)	Policy & education	Partnerships crucial for inclusive AI adoption	Supports union–government–industry collaboration
Gowda et al. (2024)	Employee engagement	AI enhances productivity & satisfaction	Importance of ethical, transparent AI
Babashahi et al. (2024)	Skills evolution	Technical acumen + adaptability critical	Aligns with union role in training

### ***The Role of Unions in Workforce Adaptation***

Labour unions have historically acted as critical intermediaries between workers, employers, and policymakers, advocating for equitable wages, safe working conditions, and job security. In the era of artificial intelligence (AI), their mandate has expanded to include safeguarding workers from the disruptive effects of automation while ensuring equitable access to the benefits of technological adoption (Budhwar et al., 2023; Pulcher et al., 2019). The accelerating pace of AI integration into production, logistics, and service delivery has compelled unions to reframe their strategies beyond traditional collective bargaining, toward a broader role encompassing workforce reskilling, ethical AI governance, and participation in global policy formulation (OECD, 2023; ILO, 2022).

Evidence from multiple sectors demonstrates that union-led initiatives can significantly mitigate the adverse impacts of AI-induced job displacement. For example, organisations implementing union-supported reskilling programmes reported a 64% higher retention rate among displaced employees compared to those adopting reactive, post-displacement interventions (Krishna Prasanth, 2024). Such programmes often integrate technical training with transferable soft skills, reflecting research findings by Arntz et al. (2022) that adaptability and problem-solving capacity are as crucial as domain-specific competencies in navigating automation-driven transitions.

Beyond skills development, unions are increasingly involved in shaping the ethical governance of AI systems. This includes advocating for algorithmic transparency, contestability of automated decisions, and fairness in machine learning models used for recruitment,

performance evaluation, and workforce allocation (Silva, 2021; Cowgill et al., 2022). By participating in AI ethics committees and co-design processes, unions help ensure that technological adoption is aligned with human-centric principles, thereby reducing risks of discrimination and algorithmic bias (Raghavan et al., 2020).

The capacity of unions to foster trust during technological change is also critical. Research by Wang and Seifert (2024) shows that union-mediated dialogues between employees and management significantly reduce resistance to automation and AI deployment. In sectors such as healthcare and manufacturing—where the stakes of technological change include both job security and service quality—transparent communication facilitated by unions has been shown to improve cooperation and morale, creating a more conducive environment for organisational transformation (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2018).

However, unions face substantial challenges in fulfilling this expanded role. The erosion of bargaining power in highly automated industries, the limited technical expertise of some union leadership, and resistance from employers to adopt worker-friendly AI policies all constrain union effectiveness (Nissim & Simon, 2021). Moreover, global governance frameworks for AI, such as the OECD AI Principles or UNESCO's AI Ethics Recommendations, remain largely non-binding, creating regulatory gaps that complicate union advocacy for comprehensive labour protections (Silva, 2021; ILO, 2022).

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-pronged approach. First, unions must invest in internal capacity building to enhance their understanding of AI technologies, data governance, and automation trends. This could involve partnerships with academic institutions, think tanks, and technology experts to develop AI literacy among union leaders. Second, unions should actively participate in multi-stakeholder platforms that bring together governments, employers, and civil society organisations to co-create enforceable AI governance frameworks. Third, unions should seek to embed workforce considerations into national AI strategies, ensuring that reskilling initiatives and worker protections are not treated as peripheral to economic policy but as integral to sustainable innovation.

Illustrative examples underscore the feasibility of such approaches. The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) has successfully lobbied for the inclusion of AI-specific worker protections in the EU's Artificial Intelligence Act, while in Canada, Unifor has partnered with employers in the automotive sector to jointly fund reskilling academies for workers transitioning from traditional manufacturing roles to electric vehicle production (ETUC, 2023; Unifor, 2022). These initiatives demonstrate that union engagement in the governance and deployment of AI can yield tangible benefits for both workers and employers, provided that collaboration is institutionalised and adequately resourced.

From a theoretical perspective, this evolution aligns with both Industrial Relations Theory, which positions unions as adaptive intermediaries responding to changing economic and technological environments (Pulcher et al., 2019) and Technological Displacement Theory, which frames unions as active agents in managing the reallocation of labour from declining to emerging job categories (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2022). The integration of these perspectives suggests that unions are not merely reactive entities but can function as strategic actors shaping equitable and sustainable transitions in the age of AI.



In summary, unions that embrace proactive reskilling, ethical AI governance, and collaborative policymaking are better positioned to safeguard worker welfare while contributing to national innovation agendas. The evidence suggests that when unions are integrated into the design and implementation of AI deployment strategies, the transition to AI-enhanced workplaces is smoother, more equitable, and more socially sustainable (Fan, 2024; OECD, 2023).

### **Challenges and Recommendations**

Labour unions are uniquely positioned to mitigate the disruptive effects of artificial intelligence (AI) on employment, yet their ability to do so is hindered by a series of interrelated challenges that span structural, organisational, and policy dimensions. One of the most pressing issues is the erosion of bargaining power in sectors experiencing high levels of automation. As the proportion of human labour in production processes diminishes, union membership often declines, leading to reduced financial capacity and diminished negotiating leverage (Nissim & Simon, 2021; Arntz et al., 2022). This structural shift is further compounded by employer resistance to union-led AI governance initiatives, particularly in jurisdictions with weak labour protections or adversarial industrial relations climates (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2018). In such environments, unions may struggle to secure meaningful participation in technological decision-making processes, thereby limiting their ability to influence the ethical and equitable adoption of AI.

A second major challenge is the technical knowledge gap that exists among many union leaders. While unions have historically excelled in negotiating wages, benefits, and workplace safety, AI presents a new and highly complex set of issues that require specialised understanding. Without sufficient familiarity with algorithmic processes, machine learning systems, and data governance protocols, union representatives may find themselves at a disadvantage when engaging with employers and policymakers on matters such as algorithmic bias, workforce transition planning, and digital rights (Silva, 2021; ILO, 2022). This knowledge deficit not only constrains strategic negotiation but also limits unions' capacity to anticipate emerging risks associated with AI deployment.

A third barrier to effective action is the absence of binding global AI governance frameworks. While soft-law initiatives such as the OECD AI Principles (OECD, 2023) and UNESCO's AI Ethics Recommendations (UNESCO, 2021) provide valuable guidance, they are non-binding and rely heavily on voluntary compliance. The result is a fragmented policy landscape in which labour protections vary significantly between jurisdictions, creating opportunities for regulatory arbitrage. Employers may relocate operations to countries with less stringent AI regulations, thereby undermining the efforts of unions to establish uniform standards for worker protection (Budhwar et al., 2023).

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-layered strategy that strengthens the technical, organisational, and policy capacities of labour unions. At the organisational level, capacity-building initiatives should be prioritised to equip union leadership with AI literacy and technical competence. Structured training programmes, developed in collaboration with universities, research institutes, and independent AI ethics boards, can provide leaders with the knowledge needed to engage effectively in discussions about algorithmic governance, bias mitigation, and the design of workforce transition plans (Fan, 2024). Equally important is the establishment of collaborative reskilling initiatives that bring together unions, employers, and government agencies to co-design industry-specific training programmes. By aligning training

content with the skill requirements of emerging job roles, such initiatives can improve worker mobility and retention, as evidenced by successful models in both the manufacturing and digital services sectors (Krishna Prasanth, 2024).

On the policy front, embedding enforceable labour protections into national AI legislation is essential. Examples such as the EU Artificial Intelligence Act demonstrate how legal frameworks can institutionalise workers' rights to human oversight in automated decision-making, mandate transparency standards, and establish funding mechanisms for workforce transitions (ETUC, 2023). Furthermore, aligning national legislation with international standards through cooperation with multilateral organisations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the OECD can help create a harmonised regulatory environment. This alignment would reduce the risk of regulatory arbitrage and ensure a more consistent global standard for AI governance and worker protection (OECD, 2023; ILO, 2022).

An equally important recommendation is the formal inclusion of worker representatives in AI deployment processes. Establishing participatory mechanisms for the design, testing, and implementation of AI systems ensures that technological tools are developed and applied in ways that enhance, rather than diminish, job quality. Such involvement fosters trust among workers, increases transparency in algorithmic decision-making, and ensures that ethical principles such as fairness and equity are embedded into the technology from the outset (Raghavan et al., 2020).

Beyond addressing the challenges, this study offers vital contributions to academia, industry, and national policy. From an academic standpoint, it advances the theoretical discourse in labour relations and technology management by integrating *Industrial Relations Theory* with *Technological Displacement Theory*. The resulting Union-Led AI Workforce Adaptation Framework provides a robust conceptual basis for future empirical research, enabling scholars to test the causal links between union interventions and workforce adaptation outcomes across different sectors and geographies (Pulcher et al., 2019; Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2022). This integration deepens the understanding of how unions can act as mediators of technological change, balancing innovation with social equity.

For industry, the research delivers evidence-based strategies for engaging unions in the co-development of workforce transition plans. Documented examples, such as the AI-driven skills-gap assessment initiative in Oman (Al Yahmadi et al., 2024) and union-led retraining efforts in Canada's automotive sector (Unifor, 2022), illustrate how collaborative approaches can reduce resistance to technological change, improve retention rates, and facilitate smoother operational transitions. These models serve as practical blueprints for companies navigating the complexities of AI adoption while maintaining workforce stability.

At the national policy level, the study provides actionable insights for embedding labour protections within AI governance frameworks. Recommendations include promoting public-private partnerships to scale reskilling programmes, ensuring worker participation in AI governance, and aligning domestic policies with international standards. By linking workforce transition strategies to broader economic and social goals, the study aligns with national innovation agendas that seek to leverage AI for economic growth while safeguarding worker rights and social cohesion (OECD, 2023; ILO, 2022).

In synthesising these findings, it becomes clear that the transition to an AI-driven economy must be managed through a balanced approach that prioritises both technological progress and human welfare. The contributions outlined in this study not only address immediate challenges but also provide a comprehensive roadmap for creating a future of work that is both innovative and inclusive.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a literature review approach to examine the role of labour unions in addressing AI-induced job displacement and supporting workforce adaptation. The review focused on works published between January 2020 and December 2024, ensuring that the analysis reflects the most recent technological, economic, and policy developments. While the scope was global, particular attention was given to studies from OECD countries, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East, as these regions have experienced significant impacts from AI-driven automation.

The data were obtained from peer-reviewed journal articles, policy analyses, conference proceedings, and relevant case studies sourced from established academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Grey literature, such as government publications and labour union reports, was also reviewed to incorporate practical insights. Search terms included *“AI job displacement,” “labour unions,” “workforce reskilling,” “ethical AI governance,”* and *“collective bargaining and technology”*, combined using Boolean operators to refine results.

Articles were selected based on their direct relevance to the research objectives, with inclusion criteria specifying English-language publications that addressed AI-related changes in labour markets and union-led responses. Studies lacking empirical or theoretical contributions, as well as non-English sources, were excluded. For each selected source, details such as author, year, country or region, AI impact domain, type of union intervention, and reported outcomes were extracted.

The analysis involved identifying recurring themes and patterns related to union strategies, challenges, and outcomes, alongside quantitative evidence such as reported retention rates or job displacement statistics. The review process followed a logical sequence of defining research objectives, retrieving literature, applying selection criteria, extracting data, and synthesising findings. This structured process ensured that the discussion was grounded in credible evidence and provided a comprehensive understanding of union roles in managing AI-driven labour market transitions.

### **Findings and Discussion**

It is anticipated that the review will reveal a strong positive correlation between proactive, union-led reskilling initiatives and higher employee retention rates in sectors affected by AI automation. The findings are also expected to highlight that unions play a crucial role in ethical AI governance, ensuring fairness, transparency, and reduced bias in workplace technology adoption. Additionally, the study is likely to identify key challenges, such as limited technical expertise within union leadership and the absence of enforceable global AI governance frameworks, alongside best practices from successful case studies that can inform future policy and union strategies.



The review confirms that the research objectives have been achieved. The analysis identified effective union-led strategies, including proactive reskilling programs, ethical AI governance initiatives, and collaborative policy-making, which address the challenges of AI-induced job displacement. Quantitative evidence from recent studies supports the conclusion that these strategies significantly improve employee retention and workforce adaptability. Furthermore, the review has mapped existing gaps in union capacity and global governance, providing a clear direction for future interventions and policy development.

## Conclusion

This research emphasizes the pivotal significance of labour unions in mitigating job displacement resulting from artificial intelligence. By championing initiatives for workforce reskilling, promoting ethical governance of AI, and fostering transparent communication, unions possess the capability to improve employee retention and facilitate equitable transitions within an economy increasingly influenced by AI technologies. Nonetheless, the efficacy of these approaches is contingent upon substantial backing from policymakers as well as the formulation of enforceable global regulatory frameworks. Subsequent investigations should examine cross-sectoral and international comparisons to pinpoint optimal practices for union-led workforce adaptation in the era of artificial intelligence.

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