Automating Even the CEO

Idea In Short

Automation is not just for filing clerks. Research decomposing hundreds of occupations into thousands of activities found that even the highest-paid roles, financial managers, physicians and senior executives including CEOs, contain a meaningful share of activity that current technology can already automate.

Routine Work Has Always Been Going Away

Automation is not a new phenomenon; it stretches back through the wheel, movable type and the cotton gin, each freeing people from mundane, repetitive tasks. Markets have always found a way to route routine work toward whoever, or whatever, can complete it most reliably and cheaply, and that dynamic is simply leverage by another name: making the machine work harder so people do not have to.1

Consultants Have a Front-Row Seat

Enterprise technology implementations routinely eliminate the wasteful busywork of manual paper processing, inter-office routing and redundant phone calls, while acquisition integrations regularly unlock economies of scale across combined factories, stores and product lines. This is creative destruction in its most literal, practical form, and it shows up constantly in ordinary consulting engagements, not just in dramatic tech headlines.

Automation Is Generally Good, With a Real Catch

Automation frees educated, empowered people to spend their time on higher-value work, and even labor-intensive manufacturing economies are automating quickly. One prominent electronics manufacturer's leadership has projected that within five years, roughly a third of its most tedious manual labor could be replaced by robots built in-house, releasing workers for more valuable tasks. The catch is real and should not be minimized: not everyone is positioned to pivot smoothly, since access to education, professional networks and capital varies enormously, and macro-level progress can be genuinely painful at the individual level. People lose jobs. Change hurts, even when the aggregate story is positive.

Nearly Half of All Work Activities

Research decomposing the labor market found that roughly 45 percent of current work activities could already be automated using existing technology.2 That figure is not a forecast of some distant future; it describes present-day capability, only partially deployed so far.

Even the Highest-Paid Roles Are Exposed

A common assumption holds that automation mainly threatens low-skill, low-wage roles. The research pushes back directly on that assumption: even the highest-paid occupations in the economy, financial managers, physicians and senior executives including chief executives, contain a significant amount of activity that current technology can already automate, once natural-language understanding reaches roughly median human performance. Combined with the baseline automatable share, that pushes the theoretical ceiling toward nearly 58 percent of total work activity.3

The Method Behind the Number

The underlying analysis examined 800 occupations as defined by federal labor statistics, decomposed them into roughly 2,000 discrete activities and clustered those activities into eighteen broader capabilities, an approach strikingly similar to the bucketing methodology used in organizational design work. The resulting exposure map showed filing clerks sitting at the very top of automation risk, with roughly 80 percent of their work activities exposed, while even CEOs showed a real, non-trivial fraction of their own activities open to automation.

Only a Small Share of Jobs Vanish Entirely

Despite the large percentage of automatable activity, only about 5 percent of jobs are projected to disappear completely. The dominant effect instead is a massive re-sorting of processes, responsibilities and scope within existing roles, shifting the balance toward higher-value synthesis and away from routine execution. Airline pilots, for instance, reportedly spend only a handful of minutes per flight actually hand-flying the aircraft on average, a level of embedded automation most passengers never think about because it has already become invisible.

What This Means for Individual Career Planning

The practical takeaway for anyone planning a career is less about which specific job title is safest and more about which specific activities within any job are worth deliberately strengthening, since the exposure math applies within occupations, not just between them. Judgment calls under uncertainty, relationship-building, creative synthesis across disparate information and genuinely novel problem-solving all sit on the harder-to-automate side of the ledger, regardless of which occupation happens to contain them, while highly repetitive, rules-based activity sits on the easier side almost everywhere it appears.

A Generational Shift Already Underway

Anyone born after the early 1990s has never lived without the internet, a baseline of information convenience and office-job disruption that earlier generations had to adapt into rather than grow up inside. Publishing a website today is roughly as easy as writing a letter in a word processor, a triviality that was simply not true a few decades earlier. The practical lesson is less about resisting automation and more about consistently re-sorting personal effort toward the synthesis, judgment and relationship work that remains stubbornly hard to automate, regardless of seniority or title.

- 1Automation
- 2Technological Unemployment
- 3Natural Language Processing

Summary

Automation rarely eliminates whole jobs; it re-sorts activities within them, filing clerks facing the steepest exposure and even CEOs seeing a real fraction. The response is not fear but re-sorting toward higher-value, more synthesis-driven work as the routine share shrinks.