TRUSTWORTHY AI – a worker perspective

Good afternoon.

Allow me to begin with a short story you may have heard before.

[SLIDE1]

Author Kurt Vonnegut tells his wife he's going out to buy an envelope: "Oh, she says well, you're not a poor man. You know, why don't you go online and buy a hundred envelopes and put them in the closet?

"And so I pretend not to hear her. And go out to get an envelope because I'm going to have a hell of a good time in the process of buying one envelope. I meet a lot of people. And, see some great looking babes. And a fire engine goes by. And I give them the thumbs up. And, and ask a woman what kind of dog that is.

"And, and I don't know. The moral of the story is, is we're here on Earth to fart around. And, of course, the computers will do us out of that. And, what the computer people don't realize, or they don't care, is we're dancing animals. You know, we love to move around. And, we're not supposed to dance at all anymore."

The fact that story continues to trend (I'm unable to locate its precise date of its publication) reveals to me an underlying anxiety many of us have about technology, the use of personal data, and the atomisation of human beings as we're now so intimately embedded in our consumer technology.

There are things we're willing to let machines do – to suggest music and movies based on our viewing habits, even to suggest friends, desirable dates and suitable jobs.

Do we value these suggestions over those of our friends and colleagues? Or do we recognise them as being merely another channel through which these suggestions come to us?

There are things, I'll wager, we won't allow machines to do for us. For example, who will buy a ticket to fly on an aeroplane without a pilot? The consumer market for that type of technology doesn't yet exist.

But I'm not here to make a Luddite argument about machines and work – which might be a common misperception about where trade unions stand on matters of digitisation and automation and, for that matter, AI - I'm here to ask questions about a world in which AI will handle more and more of the work we're willing to outsource to machines.

Much of the work undertaken by trade unions involves fostering trust. Between workers, between workers and their employers, and managing the process of change or resolving conflict by trying to rebuild trust that's been lost along the way.

[SLIDE2]

“My role as a bus driver will in effect be over. I wouldn’t have ultimate control of the vehicle, instead I’d be there as emergency-stop button-pusher. Do you think my company would pay me the same rate of pay? Of course not.” - bus driver Andrew Worth, TUC Congress November 2018

There is a widespread agreement that contemporary innovations and development in automation, computing, robotics, and artificial intelligence (AI) poses *at least the possibility* of disruption and changes in labour markets and employment.

These rapid developments have caused much anxiety among unions and others who are interested in labour markets as the prospect of mass unemployment precipitated by automation and computerisation seems evident.

But this is not a new challenge for the trade union movement.

It was a hot topic at the TUC Congress in 1956, where people were talking about a new “electronic computer” developed by the food manufacturer Lyons (Lyons Electronic Office (LEO)).

[SLIDE 3]

The computer could work out the payslips for 10,000 employees in four hours — a job that used to require 37 clerks.

The TUC echoed the optimism of John Maynard Keyne’s belief that this technology could usher us forth toward a more prosperous leisure society:

“Automation offers the prospect of higher pay, greater leisure, and healthier and less strenuous work,” but argued unions would need to make sure the benefits of greater productivity were shared with workers.

In that latter sense, our concerns today remain much as they were in 1956.

We know that machine learning has enabled computers to develop their own solutions to problems, rather than relying on explicitly programmed responses, and this potentially increases the scale of labour replacement very significantly.

Most of our work is in public services, an area where the Polanyi paradox can often apply in terms of day-to-day decision making: humans “know more than they know they know”.

As such, non-routine tasks and occupations that tend to be based on tacit understanding and situational judgement cannot be easily codified, elaborated and programmed for computers to carry out.

Social workers, social care workers, nurses, Gardaí, paramedics, or anyone else in public services - the type of public servants who meet people on what could be the worst day of their lives - are required to make judgements that require

empathy, an ability to read people and to make an assessment of the best thing to do in that situation.

[SLIDE 4 NEED WORK]

Academic studies since the turn of the millennium vary quite a bit on the extent to which whole jobs, as distinct from specific tasks, will be eliminated by evolving technology.

Nedelkoska and Quintini's 2018 study estimates that approximately half of jobs have a high likelihood of being at least *affected* by automation. Of this, 14% are "highly automatable" with a probability of automation of greater than 70%. Additionally, 32% of jobs have a risk of automation between 50% and 70%, pointing to the possibility of significant change in the way these jobs are carried out.

And while the academics dispute the extent of the risk of automation to labour markets, they tend to agree on trends, including the inverse relationship between education level and risk of automation. As recently as 2018 the OECD said that this particular trend is "already reflected in employment outcomes."

Workers with lower levels of education are the most at risk of automation and workers in the occupations estimated to have a higher automation risk are displaying a much higher unemployment rate.

In Ireland, Doyle and Jacobs 2018 study finds that approximately two out of five jobs in Ireland are likely to be impacted substantially by automation. Breaking this down on a sectoral basis, they find that the transportation and storage; agriculture, forestry and fishing; and construction sectors have a probability of automation of greater than 50%.

In a small, open economy that's a very significant figure. They also find that women tend to be employed in occupations with a higher risk of automation than men.

[Slide 4] 4 day week

The most common response by unions across Europe to the advancing tide of change anticipated has been to call for greater dialogue, cooperation, and consultation when introducing new technology to a workplace.

Those three elements: **greater dialogue, cooperation, and consultation**, are the oldest and most reliable tools we have to deal with the onset of change.

They are the most efficient tools, I think, for what lies ahead.

Trade unions have made it their goal to ensure that the benefits of automation and technological development lead to better working lives. This can be in the form of elimination of repetitive or dangerous tasks, or the reduction in working hours but with maintenance of pay, for example through a four day week. The watchword has been agreement.

My union, Fórsa, set out its position on automation in the civil service in a submission to DPER a year ago, which states that Fórsa will support "properly thought out automation, controlled by workers whose aim will be the continued enhancement and delivery of public services."

What will not be countenanced is "the diminution of workplaces through the march of automation for automation sake."

Our position highlights the importance of training and skill development. We praise developments like the retraining of staff in Revenue as allowing that office to "best deliver on their goal … rather than [reducing] jobs."

We underscore the importance of technology in securing a better work/life balance for workers, with technological developments allowing workers potentially "greater autonomy over their working time," and we argue against the outsourcing of associated IT systems.

[SLIDE 5]

Within my world, the gold standard of communication is not our website, our news bulletins and daily digests delivered on the Newsweaver platform, our social media feeds or our constant stream of internal emails.

The gold standard, as determined by our most important service users is one on one personal contact with a local union rep. Most of our members' immediate concerns or problems can be dealt with in a single conversation with a local rep. That outstrips the technological performance of any of our digital communication tools, and that's unlikely to change.

Most of us know there are specific types of problems, people, situations that require human judgement, empathy, listening skills and human connection. It's the lifeblood of our business.

Similarly, I mentioned greater dialogue, cooperation, and consultation.

These approaches will govern trade union's approach to the changes wrought in a labour market shaped and re-shaped by AI-driven technology.

- Trade unions have called for greater dialogue, cooperation, and consultation when introducing new technology to a workplace.
- Trade unions have made it their goal to ensure that the benefits of automation lead to better working lives for their members.
- Fórsa has highlighted the importance of training and skill development.
- We believe the improvement of a work/life balance should be of prime focus
- And we believe technological improvements should not be an excuse for outsourcing in the workplace.
- The UK public service union Unison has developed an officials' guide for *Bargaining Over Automation.*

- And the German public services union ver.di organises annual conferences on digitalisation and the future of work, affording opportunities similar to the one you've given me today, and for which I'm very grateful

I'm indebted today to the work of an exceptional young man named Craig Whelan who is an analyst with the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission and a Fórsa member.

He spent some months with us last year - as part of his UCD Masters of Public Policy programme - developing a scoping report on how new technologies could affect Fórsa and its members, and I've drawn quite a bit of material today from that report.

Craig's report concludes with the following recommendations:

- Further research is needed to fully estimate and quantify how many Fórsa members are at risk of automation, job displacement, and disruption.
- That we should be proactive in seeking agreements with employers on automation, and ensure that this process is worker led.
- That we should should take the lead in the automation debate in Ireland. And develop a policy campaign taking inspiration from other European unions.
- Significantly, he recommended that these issues should not be considered separate to core union business.

Barry O'Sullivan and I have been friends for a few years now and I always enjoy talking to him about where technology is going, the nuances and developments of machine learning and I envy him that ability too of understanding the prosaic language of mathematics and its underlying role in all of this.

Barry and I almost never finish a conversation without us both talking about our families and we will exchange notes on his passion for gardening, and my obsession with baking sourdough bread.

These are the stories exchanged between Vonnegut's 'dancing animals' - crucial to sustaining human connections. We tell each other stories to generate empathy, understanding and connection and, in so doing, we generate a space between us within which we can successfully negotiate our differences.

This is what good trade union officials do with employers, building relationships so that when problems occur we have the tools to fix them.

Everything is underpinned by trust.

Somewhere in the not-too-distant future, there is a labour market that will be powered, shaped and influenced by AI technology. It's presence in our world, particularly where we share the workplace with AI, must be underpinned by the same level of trust we can foster between people in the workplace.

As it happens, my 14 year old son told me this morning his philosophy class had discussed AI, and whether or not we should fear AI, a couple of weeks ago, so I asked him for their conclusions.

The verdict of the Kingswood Community School 2nd years is: "We don't need to fear AI. For the most part, it's designed to assist us, to make jobs easier. The only thing we need to be wary of is the motivations of the person who builds a particular AI system, and we need to know what our data is being used for."

Thank you