Has Technology Destroyed Jobs?
A Systematic Review of Historical Labor Displacement

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Abstract

Concerns about job-replacing technology commonly accompany waves of invention (Bix 2000) and have returned to the center of public discussions about innovation and labor markets (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014; Autor 2022; Acemoglu and Johnson 2023). This paper reviews historical studies that document labor displacement following technological change. While the employment effects of recent technology have been examined (Hötte, Somers, and Theodorakopoulos 2023), evidence of decreasing marginal breakthroughs in the late 20th century (Bloom et al. 2020; Deming, Summers, and Ong 2025) suggests that history may provide a better basis for understanding the potential effects of more transformative future automation (Schneider and Vipond 2023). We search major academic databases for sources that mention labor displacement and replacement, identifying 3172 studies. Following title and abstract screening, 207 sources were advanced to our full-text review and extraction, of which 96 sources have currently been reviewed in full text and 63 extracted. Our current findings show that there have been a variety of labor-displacing innovations in the past, with widely varying impacts, including extended periods of unemployment. We find only limited support for the hypothesis that displaced workers can smoothly transition into new work. The paper contributes to the important and growing debate about the potential effects of ongoing innovation and provides a broader empirical grounding for public and policy discussions.

JEL Codes: J63, N30, N70, O33

Keywords: labor displacement, technological change, technological unemployment, innovation

⋆We thank Robert Margo and John Styles for their assistance in identifying relevant studies for our review, and we thank attendees at the XX World Economic History Congress and the 2025 European Historical Economics Society Conference for their comments. This research was supported by the Work and Wellbeing in History project, funded by the Norwegian Centre for Advanced Study.