

There's a growing debate about the impact that artificial intelligence will have on our future, with two tech luminaries themselves -- Tesla CEO Elon Musk and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg -- as figureheads representing glass half empty versus half full perspectives, respectively. However, many are predicting that with the advent of AI, we will see the rise of a "useless class" -- people who are not just unemployed, but are unemployable. This is a chilling and pessimistic view of the future. If the last century of incredible advances in digital technologies leads to the creation of a "useless class" of people who have nothing better to do than play virtual-reality video games all day, that's a tragedy for civilization. Last week Musk commented that AI is an "existential risk for human civilization." Zuckerberg retorted that comments like this are "pretty irresponsible," to which Musk tweeted that Zuckerberg's "understanding of the subject is limited." We can leverage AI to ensure that opportunity is more equally distributed around the country and around the world, rather than concentrated in small pockets of urban wealth and opportunity. While these comments refer to sweeping impacts, many are debating one specific area where we are already seeing the effects of AI: jobs. But if that happens, shame on us because we are in charge of our destiny, not AI. AI itself is not a thing; it is a series of combined technologies that humans are creating and guiding the impacts of, including impacts on work. Everyone in society has an obligation to ensure that people are educated for a future in which AI touches every aspect of work. However, there are indications that people in technology are starting to think differently about their obligations toward humanity, and to design their products accordingly. In particular, those of us in the technology industry have an obligation to shape the future of AI and robotics to help create better and more productive jobs. But it's up to those of us who build technology to ensure that it augments human workers, not replaces them. Jobs are intrinsically linked to our survival, as they're the way most of us earn income and are therefore able to provide for our basic needs. If that's what happens, we will look back at Musk's remarks and say they were accurate. This is an area where Silicon Valley culture has fallen short, with its obsessive focus on eliminating labor costs. As humans, we're trained to watch for threats to our survival and predict tragedies. Investing energy in the vigilant watch over the future of work is wise because only one thing is sure: Jobs will change. However, buying into doom and gloom is not wise, in my opinion. When it comes to dirty, dangerous, and demeaning work, automation can save lives and increase human dignity. There is time to shape our future and make it a positive one.