Combatting skill shortages and addressing automation fears with job management software

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Australia is currently in the midst of a national skill shortage. The 2017 statistics, posted by the Department of Jobs and Small Businesses, showed a rating of S, meaning National Shortage, for almost the entire 'Technicians and Trade Workers' sector.

Western Australia seems to be experiencing the brunt of the skills shortage, with construction groups throughout the state claiming that they are operating in the midst of an 'apprenticeship drought'[1]. Numbers released by the Department of Training Workforce and Development have shown that apprenticeship intakes have fallen by almost 90% since 2015 in various areas of the Western Australian construction industry.

It's no secret that the 21st century has brought with it a bundle of new hardware and software to automate various areas of the average business workflow, and this seems like a viable and exciting solution to combat and offset this problem of productivity loss, created due to a lack of skilled labourers.

However, some see automation as a further deterrent to potential employees in this industry.

This fear it seems, comes from common misconceptions surrounding what automation actually means when applied to a trade. Elicia Kennedy, writing for the ABC in July 2018, spoke with Chris Kent from Hays Recruiting about the concerns of those in the recruitment industry of Western Australia with regards to fears of automation[2]. According to Chris, automation as a concept in the field services and trade contracting sectors has been significantly misunderstood; "There's been some scary reports about what jobs will be automated but the reality is it's tasks that are automated," he said.

Mr Kent believes that some perceive manual jobs as ones with limited futures, most likely due to these fears of automation. The truth of the matter, as many business owners and operators in this sector would know and as Chris Kent said, is that there are little jobs that can be fully automated.

The technology that is on the market today for businesses in the field services and trade contractor sectors are to make lives and jobs simpler, to enable a better business, not to completely remove the human aspect from employment.

The truth of the matter is that while this planet, and our country, is finding its stride when it comes to technological developments and advancements, we are in no way nearing a world similar to that of Will Smith's famed movie 'I, Robot'.

Dr Andrew Charlton, Director of research firm 'AlphaBeta', undertook a study in 2015 that was commissioned by Google and assessed the change automation is bringing to Australian jobs, and found that over the next 15 years, automation would reduce the average Australian weekly workload by only ***2 hours[3].***

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[1] Tyrrell, Claire. "WA builders warn of skills shortage during apprenticeship drought". The West Australian. June 18, 2018. https://thewest.com.au/business/construction/wa-builders-warn-of-skills-shortage-during-apprenticeship-drought-ng-b88866456z

[2] Kennedy, Elicia. "A new skills shortage looms in Western Australia as fears of automation turns workers away". ABC News. July 9, 2018. http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-09/fears-of-robot-jobs-takeover-creating-wa-skills-shortage/9950368

[3] AlphaBeta, "The Automation Advantage" Accessed on 31 July, 2018. Available at https://www.alphabeta.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/The-Automation-Advantage.pdf

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Yes you read that right, over the next *15 years* the average *weekly* workload will be reduced by *only 2 hours*. This workload reduction isn't due to a machine or robot ***taking over*** a job either, it is ***changing*** the way that job is being done.

This is the point that needs to be stressed when it comes to discussing automation, especially when Australia is in the midst of a skills shortage: technology in the field services and trade contracting sectors is not developed to take jobs away, but to enable better business by giving technicians in the field, and administrative staff in the office, a simpler and more effective way to complete tasks.

Job management solutions like simPRO's, is created to allow business owners and operators to enable better business at any point in their company's life - be that in a time of flourishing opportunities, or deep desperation.

simPRO's cloud-based solutions are designed to improve visibility, profitability and performance by creating a streamlined system through which businesses can efficiently complete day-to-day workflows. The technicians are still needed, the administrative staff are still needed, general operators around the business are still needed - rarely are employees cast out by a company solely due to the software it employs.

This software offers an opportunity to account for lost productivity in a time where skilled labourers are hard to find by automating a variety of processes - thereby giving the skilled technicians that are a part of staff, more time to be out in the field, increasing billable hours and profitability.

The solution enables better business with a variety of features which can address a number of areas of a company - like asset management, invoicing, estimating and projects.

During a shortage, it is important to make valuable use of the skilled labourers that you do have. simPRO's Maintenance Planner and customisable asset reports mean that staff can quickly and easily monitor preventative and reactive maintenance for assets across thousands of sites with streamlined compliance and reporting features - giving them more time to be out in the field working, less time in the office, and a comprehensive view of assets[4].

What's even better is that it doesn't take away jobs from capable technicians either, just automates the mundane and repetitive parts of a service or maintenance job, the grunt work is still there and needed to be done, whether it's setting up and monitoring a machine to do the job or doing it yourself.

simPRO's estimating tools are another fantastic example of how new technology in the field services and trade contracting sectors automates the more ordinary and repetitive parts of a job's routine, without eliminating the need for manpower.

One of these features is the Form Builder, which allows administrative staff to design and format quotes that are specific to a business, and can pre-fill fields in project quotes with simPRO data. This means that when it comes time for the final quote to be submitted, there are fields in the quote template that will pull corresponding information from their simPRO database and populate the final form[5].

This solution is a shining example of how 21st century technology in field service and trade contracting sectors is not driving the elimination of jobs, but instead enabling better business.

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[4] https://www.simpro.com.au/features/asset-maintenance
[5] https://www.simpro.com.au/features/estimating

While the country is deep in the midst of a national skill shortage of trades and technician workers, this technology is working hard to provide other avenues through which business owners and operators can maintain or even increase productivity - the focus is on optimising workflows so that staff can make valuable use of their time.

Project management software gives businesses the ability to manage multi-stage projects with ease - allowing for estimating, scheduling and invoicing at each stage of a project is the most optimal way possible[6].

Real-time project tracking allows staff and business owners to report on everything from materials and resources to purchase orders, contractor work orders and customers invoices. Project supervisors and managers can easily keep track of committed, recognised and forecasted costs using this tool due to its centralised location and cloud-based data storage, meaning it can be accessed anytime and anywhere by staff.

This is the theme with technology in this industry: it is all about enabling efficiencies - bringing about better business through confidence in a streamlined system that can maintain productivity levels, or even increase them, no matter the size of a team of staff. Improving visibility and profitability by automating tasks, not jobs, and keeping technicians out in the field, maximising billable hours.

The ongoing skill shortages have hindered businesses in the field service and trade contracting sectors previously, however now, the 21st century has brought with it tools to combat low productivity levels. Cloud-based software, and other job management technologies were not created in the hopes of removing the man from the job and replacing him with a machine, but instead making the man's life easier - automating tasks and mundane processes and giving him the opportunity to increase his efficiency and profitability.

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[6] https://www.simpro.com.au/features/project-management