

ASPIRATIONS FOR THE NEXT 50 YEARS

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Automation is inevitable, we must embrace it

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Thinking specifically about automation, it is already been widely used in parts of the textile industry, particularly in China, as I have mentioned. But the point to be made is that in the overwhelming majority of cases, automation and robots are only carrying out repetitive works. In these cases, automated technology is being harnessed to carry out extremely dull and mundane work which would ordinarily be done by the lowest skill/paid workers. Is it taking jobs? In some cases, jobs may disappear, but they will and are being replaced by higher skill jobs which can only be carried out by workers.

One example here is "sewbots"—short for sewing robots—a name used for automated sewing machines. This

and similar technologies have been around for many years, and yet it is not like they have turned our industry upside down overnight. In addition, I have yet to hear a story of a "sewbot" leading to job losses. Instead, these and similar technologies are more likely to be used by a manufacturer to increase speed to market and factory efficiency and productivity. In other words, they are used to compliment and support an existing set up while also allowing people to focus on areas of activity where they can bring genuine added value.

Where else are robots and automation being used in our industry? The International Finance Corporation, the financial arm of the World Bank, has worked extensively in the textile industry, particularly around developing more

sustainable supply chains.

According to its most recent research on the issue, published during 2020, automation in garment assembly is not progressing at the same pace as in other industries, with typically assembly activities such as sewing still very much the domain of human beings.

There are reasons why massive automation is not yet happening, and these include technical issues and cost concerns, particularly since it is tricky for manufacturers to forecast return on investment given the unpredictability of orders. These issues have, of course, been accentuated during the past nine months as the impact of the coronavirus pandemic has placed huge pressure on factory finances.

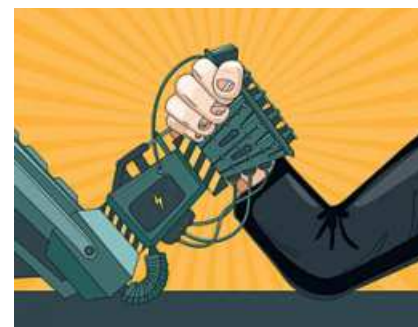
That said, the IFC suggests that segments of the manufacturing process, such as ginning, spinning, weaving and knitting have now been largely automated. Progressive factories are also introducing technologies such as 3D printing, laser cutting and laser stonewashing, resulting in fewer assembly line jobs but greater opportunities for skilled workers who will need to be trained and educated to operate next generation machinery, integrate telecommunications networks, service and repair sophisticated equipment and develop the programming languages that are the brain centres of modern factories.

In other words, automation sees some jobs disappear but new jobs spring up in adjacent, high value areas. Such progression is the hallmark of a successful economy.

Another key factor to consider in the automation debate is population growth. The world's population is expected to expand to an estimated nine billion people by 2030. In turn, the apparel industry is forecast to double in size to a USD 4.4 trillion business.

Some forecasters believe that, in the

wake of this growth, new consumer markets will emerge with a focus on bespoke, individual apparel products produced at speed using 3D printing and associated infrastructure. The mass market will never disappear but a rising middle class with increased disposable income will likely see greater demand for



high quality, individualised, responsibly produced apparel products. In many cases, consumers will want to know exactly how these products were made, using what materials, in what country and factory and the conditions in which they were made. Indeed, two of the most popular words in the fashion industry being used by brands and retailers right now are traceability and transparency.

All of the above requirements can only be satisfied by modern, progressive factories which blend a combination of sophisticated, automatized infrastructure with highly qualified and trained personnel. The automation and the skilled personnel go hand in hand and, as indicated, this brave new world will potentially lead to higher quality jobs in Bangladesh.

Another reason why Bangladesh must embrace automation is because the move towards more bespoke products which are fully transparent and traceable is something many brands are increasingly looking at. We even see some pundits suggest that this is an argument for near-shoring—the process whereby

apparel production takes place closer to actual markets. The argument goes that to satisfy consumer demand for speed, precision and delivery, near-shoring will be on the rise moving forwards.

I personally have never bought this argument. Our industry has had the option of nearshoring for many decades. Indeed, it has been tried several times but with limited success due to a lack of local expertise, know-how and infrastructure.

Nonetheless, Bangladesh must remain alert to this issue and understand that, moving forwards, brands and retailers will be demanding a more sophisticated and compelling offering from sourcing hubs. As one of the world's leading garment manufacturers we must be ready to up our game: to produce faster and smarter and offer seamless packages, often using vertically integrated solutions (as China has so successfully embraced).

The only way we can do these things is by embracing automation. Automation and technology are the essential connective tissues, the invisible industrial lubricants that will enable our industry to boost its productivity and competitiveness on the global stage.

In summary, increase in automation and technology is an inevitable process all economies go through as they move from Lesser Developed Country (LDC) status. Bangladesh is at present the largest LDC in terms of population and economic size but it looks set to leave this category in the next few years.

To do so, it needs to continue its process of modernisation, embracing the digitised world and technological innovation to boost competitiveness while providing well paid, meaningful employment for its inhabitants.

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An automated spreading machine at Pacific Jeans.

PHOTO: WSJ

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