AI and the Future for Workers: Labor Union Responses to Artificial Intelligence

January 29, 2025

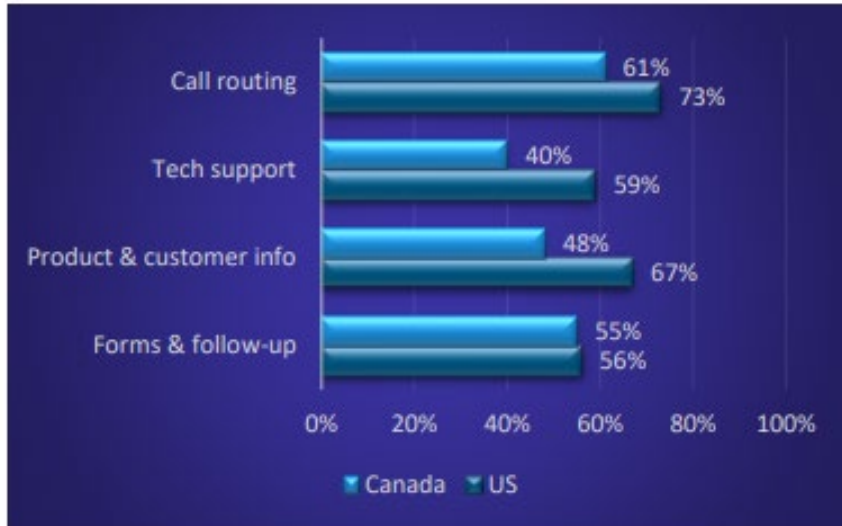# The Use of AI is Growing in Call Centers and other CWA Industries

Figure 1: % reporting their employer uses work automating AI — *Call routing [US (N=1049) and Canada (N=148)]; Tech support [US (N=914) and Canada (N=133)]; Product & customer info [US (N=1042) and Canada (N=156)]; Forms & follow-up [US (N=897) and Canada (N=154)]*
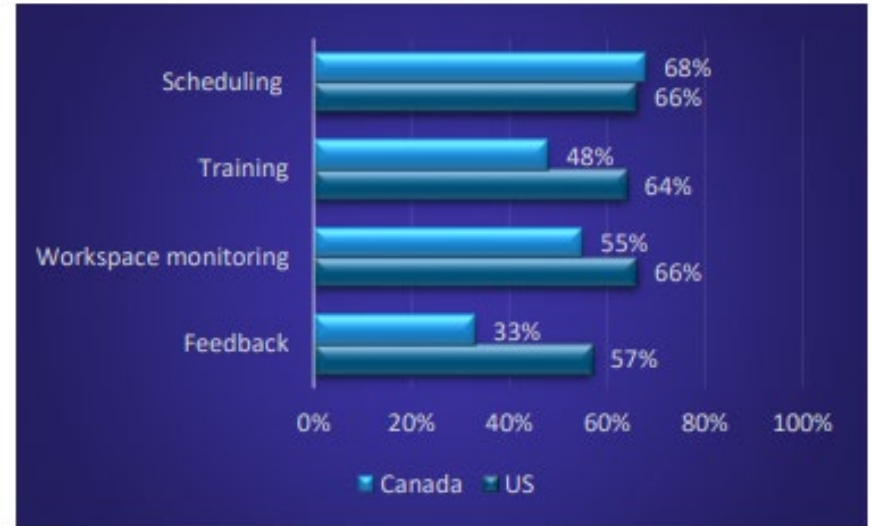
Figure 2: % reporting their employer uses management automating AI — *Scheduling [US (N=992) and Canada (N=136)]; Training [US (N=922) and Canada (N=129)]; Workspace monitoring [US (N=804) and Canada (N=120)]; Feedback [US (N=927) and Canada (N=129)]*

Virginia Doellgast, et al, *AI in contact centers Artificial intelligence and algorithmic management in frontline service workplaces* (2023)
https://ecommons.cornell.edu/items/2c04c957-d672-400e-9aed-adb5f6ace640

Debbie Goldman, *Resistance in the Digital Workplace: Call Centers Workers in Bell Telephone Companies, 1965 - 2005,* dissertation (2021)
https://drum.lib.umd.edu/handle/1903/27835

<u>On Bargaining:</u> *Our goal in bargaining is not to stop new technologies but to ensure the benefits of new technologies are broadly shared… A comprehensive approach is needed. Worker voices should be represented at every stage of the development and implementation process.*

<u>On Policy:</u> *Government policy should recognize the need for collective bargaining and worker consultation to play central roles in adoption of AI and other new technologies, and seek to strengthen and complement workers' bargaining power. Workers are the experts on their jobs and workplaces, and are therefore best positioned to identify risks and guardrails needed.*

CWA Committee on Artificial Intelligence, Report to the CWA Executive Board on AI Principles and Recommendations (November 2023) :
cwa.org/ai-principles

International Case Studies of AI Bargaining and Co-Determination

- International unions are reaching agreements that balance employer and employee concerns around AI adoption
- Agreements are supported by a range of frameworks for worker empowerment, including industrial bargaining, works councils, and policy guardrails on workplace safety.
- These case studies illustrate how "high-road" approaches to workplace AI can be fostered when workers have a voice.

Unions Mobilizing and Bargaining on Workplace AI

- Unions are centering workplace tech in bargaining campaigns, educating members and the public to win new protections
- Frontline members report misguided AI hurts jobs but also customers, patients, and communities
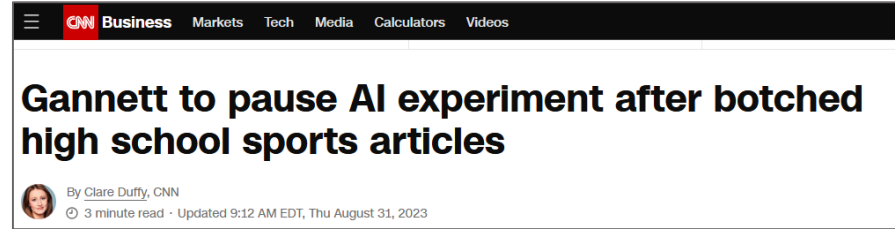- Workers are key stakeholders in the development of safe and effective AI

Policy landscape

- Bargaining can be quicker than policy to address new issues, but policy can be critical to raising the floor and prohibiting abusive practices
- EU AI Act
  - Three year process; labor unions engaged but were largely sidelined
  - Learnings for US
    - Banned recognition of emotions in workplaces and educational settings
    - Created risk framework that addresses AI used in employment decisions
- US context
  - DOL principles for worker well-being in AI – see archive.org
  - Bipartisan Congressional proposals do not address worker concerns
  - State bills are seeking to rein in abusive surveillance, algorithmic decision-making, and other harmful uses of AI systems

Media workers rein in GAI

- Actors and writers raised awareness of the risks of GAI in 2023 strike.
- SAG-AFTRA negotiated rules for use of "digital replicas" and "synthetic performers".
- Journalists are winning protections against job cuts and ensuring editorial control over AI use
  - The NewsGuild-CWA has made bargaining over AI a priority

CNN Business Markets Tech Media Calculators Videos

Gannett to pause AI experiment after botched high school sports articles

By Clare Duffy, CNN
3 minute read · Updated 9:12 AM EDT, Thu August 31, 2023

NEW YORK POST

Sports Illustrated publisher fires CEO after outlet caught posting AI-generated stories with fake authors

The Verge / Tech

CNET pauses publishing AI-written stories after disclosure controversy

Tech workers challenge the Masters of AI

- Alphabet Workers Union-CWA represents both full-time Google employees and outsourced vendor workers, all of whom are critical to Google's AI ambitions.
- Workers called "raters" evaluate the quality of AI outputs and train the LLM models.
  - Raters face low pay, lack of any guaranteed amount of work, unstable employment
  - Can be suspended by an algorithm without pay
- Software workers employed by Google see harms from the "vendorized" business model and fear for their own job security.