Futurist Warns: 'Make Oregon Robot Proof'

by Jeff Mapes

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Oregon’s top political and business leaders were asked Monday to consider a topic they may not have given much thought before: “How do we build an Oregon that is robot-proof?”

That was how Portland futurist Steve Brown, speaking at the annual Oregon Leadership Summit, began his presentation about the dizzying rate of progress in artificial intelligence. The huge advances promise innovations ranging from new cancer treatments to – literally – flying cars.

But these developments also threaten to sweep away millions of jobs around the country.

“We are facing an automation tsunami,” said Brown, a former Intel strategist who showed slides of a stunning array of robots entering the workforce. Robots that can lay 3,000 bricks a day compared to 500 for a human. Robots cleaning floors and figuring out what grocery shelves need to be restocked. Robotic intelligence driving cars, trucks and drones. Robots flipping burgers.

As pressure has grown to raise the minimum wage, Brown said, Intel would get calls from fast food executives saying, “I need to automate, I need to get humans completely out of the burger manufacturing process.”

It’s not just lower-wage jobs at risk, either.

Health professionals who diagnoses brain scans may discover that a machine is more capable and cheaper for doing the same task. A new study from McKinsey &
Company found that 23 percent of jobs could be automated by 2030.

Portland economist John Tapogna found in a study he did for the Portland Business Alliance that about half of the state’s jobs could eventually be at risk.

Both Brown and Tapogna, however, noted that automation is nothing new. Mechanization and modern manufacturing ended a time when most people lived and worked on farms. But it also created many more jobs than it destroyed, a process that in many ways has continued throughout the development of the digital economy. Think, for example, of all the people now making a living developing apps for smart phones – a device that only came on the market around a decade ago.

But Tapogna said there are signs of dislocation. The number of non-working males between 25 and 54, the prime working years, has grown from 5 percent to 15 percent in recent decades, he said.

“If we end up over the course of the next 15 to 20 years with a quarter to 33 percent of prime age adults not working,” he said, “that’s going to be a huge problem.”

Brown said he is concerned that the pace of change is so rapid “we won’t have the ability to move the people from the old jobs to the new jobs and train them quickly enough.”

Brown and Tapogna told the business and political leaders gathered at the Oregon Convention Center in Portland that the state has some advantages it can pursue in making sure it does well in the robotics revolution.

Intel, which has a huge presence in Oregon, designs many of the electronic chips that are fueling innovation. And Oregon State University has a robotics program that one website ranks as the fourth best in the country. Brown and Tapongna encouraged the state to do what it can to be a center of innovation for an increasingly automated society.
Brown also had some personal advice: The more your job involves empathy, judgment, human ethics and variety, he said, the better your chances of staying employed.

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