

Automation/Mechanization: The Beginning or the End of Your Job

Automate? Sure why not ... then I will be in the same mindset as just about everyone else. Are you *sure* you want to go in this direction? You find yourself at a crossroad. Do I, should I, can I afford to pursue mechanization in my business? You need to ask yourself these questions and a lot more. Mechanization is not just about changing things over and saving money on labor.

What is your initial cost for the machine(s)? How long will it take for your ROI? How long will it take to convert from current methods to mechanization? Time ... time is money, what will the disruption cost? Training people for new jobs?

Coming from a machining background, I (Mike) can honestly say that “mechanization” is **not** the sole direction we should be going. Yes, we think of all the robots, artificial intelligence, new gadgets that we can implement and replace employees. But are you or will you be prepared for a mechanical error? The question is not if it will happen but when it will happen.

I’ve seen mechanized machines spit out junk because of a malfunction that was caught way too late. What do you do with the junk? How much will it cost to start over, and can you start over? The machine shops I’ve worked in had quality control departments, I’ve been in very few greenhouses or nurseries that are set up with quality control departments.

Some businesses are turning to automation and mechanization strictly to save money, which I think is a huge mistake. They can cut costs by other means. I just read an interesting online article in Business Insider dated May 18, 2017, by Hayley Peterson: “A jobs threat worse than mass store closures could fire more than 7 million retail workers.”

It states that roughly 6 million to 7.5 million retail jobs “likely will be automated out of existence in the coming years, leaving a large portion of the retail workforce at risk of becoming ‘standed workers,’” according to the 56-page report by investment

advisory firm Cornerstone Capital Group.

I will not go into more details, but you can go to their website and read the full story there. My question is just what are people supposed to do? How will we compete with robots for a job? If at some point we get our greenhouses and nurseries fully automated, what will our production line workers do?

No doubt a lot of people will find themselves either going back to school to get a different education or having to be trained for a different job.

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This is where Mike and I (A.R.) come to a parting of ways on the topic. I also feel badly for the people whose jobs are being automated away. But think back into the past. How many jobs are there for horse-drawn wagons anymore? Do we still have lamp lighters to turn on street lighting at dusk? How about conductors on trains? We gutted our passenger train systems almost a century ago when we went with individual automobiles. In retrospect, this was perhaps a poor decision.

Virtually all jobs have become extinct over our history as we progress. Trying to hold onto the past is not a proven way of humanity making progress. My suggestion (undoubtedly held by many other people) is that we prepare training programs to help ease the transitions from one job to another. We really cannot continue to hold onto coal as a power source in the face of trying to alter the damage we are doing to our planet. Compassion for misplaced workers should involve a more responsive and practical support system from the government. We are oddly out of balance with respect to how we make our decisions. As Mike indicates, choosing mechanization solely to save in labor costs is short-sighted. It would be nice if for once decisions were made looking at all of the factors and repercussions.

In case you think that I favor mechanization, I don’t. I pull weeds in my garden as a means of relaxation. I simply don’t believe in using a lot of herbicides when we don’t always know the side effects. I like making food from scratch and doing things the hard way since the results are what I am seeking. Fine for my personal life but clearly not what would be effective in a horticultural business.

So as Mike says, you need to ask yourself many questions before deciding to accept mechanization in your business. Do your homework. [gpn](#)



Chase Agricultural Consulting, LLC was formed in 2011 by Ann (A.R.) Chase and Mike Zemke. Ann has more than 35 years experience in research, diagnostics and practical consulting in plant pathology. She has been retired from the University of Florida since 1994 but remains on staff as a Professor Emeritus. Mike holds an Associate of Applied Science in manufacturing drafting and started his education in horticulture when he and Ann were married in 1995. He specializes in communications of all sorts within the industry.