AI, skilled jobs and why this matters for growers

A lot of the public conversation about AI is still stuck on the idea of robots replacing manual labour. I think that misses the point. The first big impact of AI is much more likely to be on routine white-collar work: the sort of work done on a screen, in an office, with a keyboard.

That includes research, first-draft writing, summary notes, standard reporting, basic analysis, compliance paperwork and a lot of administrative processing. In other words, not the whole job, but the repetitive and lower-value part of many jobs.

That matters because it changes where value sits in the labour market.

Take consultancy as an example. Traditionally, a fair bit of entry-level work has been done by junior staff pulling together background research, scanning documents, summarising interviews, writing early drafts and preparing slide decks. AI can now do a lot of that first-pass work much faster and accurately.

That does not mean consultants disappear. It does mean the routine part of the job gets thinner. The real value shifts to judgement, experience, client relationships, knowing what matters, testing whether the evidence is any good and being able to stand behind the final advice. So yes, AI will reduce demand for some kinds of junior writing and research work. But it will also lift the importance of higher-level thinking and practical judgement.

That same logic applies well beyond offices.
In horticulture and wine grapes, AI is not just about cutting labour costs. It is increasingly about giving growers access to specialist capability that is often hard to find, expensive or simply unavailable when needed.

That is where AI gets interesting and becomes very valuable.
Growers are being asked to make highly technical decisions all the time: about crop load, fruit counts, irrigation, disease risk, plant stress, timing, nutrition and yield forecasting. The issue is that not every grower is a plant physiologist, data analyst, irrigation expert or disease specialist. Nor should they have to be. There is already a shortage of people with deep technical expertise and in many areas that shortage will only get worse.

AI helps bridge that gap.
For example, AI-enabled cameras and vision systems can now do crop estimation and fruit counting far more quickly and more accurately than manual methods. That gives growers better information earlier, which improves harvest planning, labour planning and marketing decisions.

In vineyards and orchards, AI tools are also helping interpret plant and environmental data: things like moisture levels, vine water stress, canopy performance and block-by-block variation. Instead of relying only on visual judgement or waiting for specialist advice, growers can increasingly get real-time insight into what is happening in the field and what action is needed.
The same goes for disease detection. AI tools can help identify problems earlier and more accurately, which means growers can target treatment better, avoid blanket responses and reduce waste. This is good for reducing cost, increasing productivity and sustainable environmental performance as well.
So the real labour-market story is not simply that AI replaces workers. It is that AI changes who does what, and where expertise comes from.

In some parts of the economy, AI will take out routine tasks. In other parts, it will act more like an expert assistant: lifting the capability of people already on the ground. That is especially important in sectors like horticulture and viticulture, where practical decisions matter, margins are tight and specialist advice is not always close at hand.

Used well, AI can make businesses more productive not because it eliminates people, but because it helps ordinary people make better decisions, faster, and with more confidence. That is why I think the labour-market question is bigger than "what jobs will disappear?" The better question is: how do we use AI to lift the value of the people we have? And what are the new occupations and expertise that will be required to harness AI?

For New Zealand, and especially for our growing sectors, that is where the real opportunity sits.