

Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid

The robots are coming—but at least in Europe, people are resisting. Does the continent need to catch up?

BY ANNAMARYA SCACCIA

SPECTACLES IN THE 1200S. Machine tools in the 1700s. Camera phones in the 1990s. Whatever the technological advancement was, Europeans had a reputation of embracing it. But some experts are worried that the continent has become resistant to a critical innovation: robots. Or “robotic systems,” actually, which include both those familiar steel-skeleton objects and various other forms of artificial intelligence. Asked to rate their view of the technology, Europeans expressed growing discomfort no matter what its

purpose, according to a recent study from the Leibniz Institute for Educational Trajectories and the University of Würzburg. Indeed, between 2012 and 2017, people in 24 of the 27 European countries surveyed became either less comfortable or more hostile toward robots and AI.

That isn’t good news, of course, given the sizable sums companies are pouring into tech. But it doesn’t surprise Werner Penk, president of Korn Ferry’s Global Technology practice. He says the results reflect how Europe continues to

fall behind technologically compared to neighboring regions and the United States, because it is stymied by employment anxieties. “There is fear against the new dimension of digitization,

including robotic systems,” Penk says. “We’re not winning the future.”

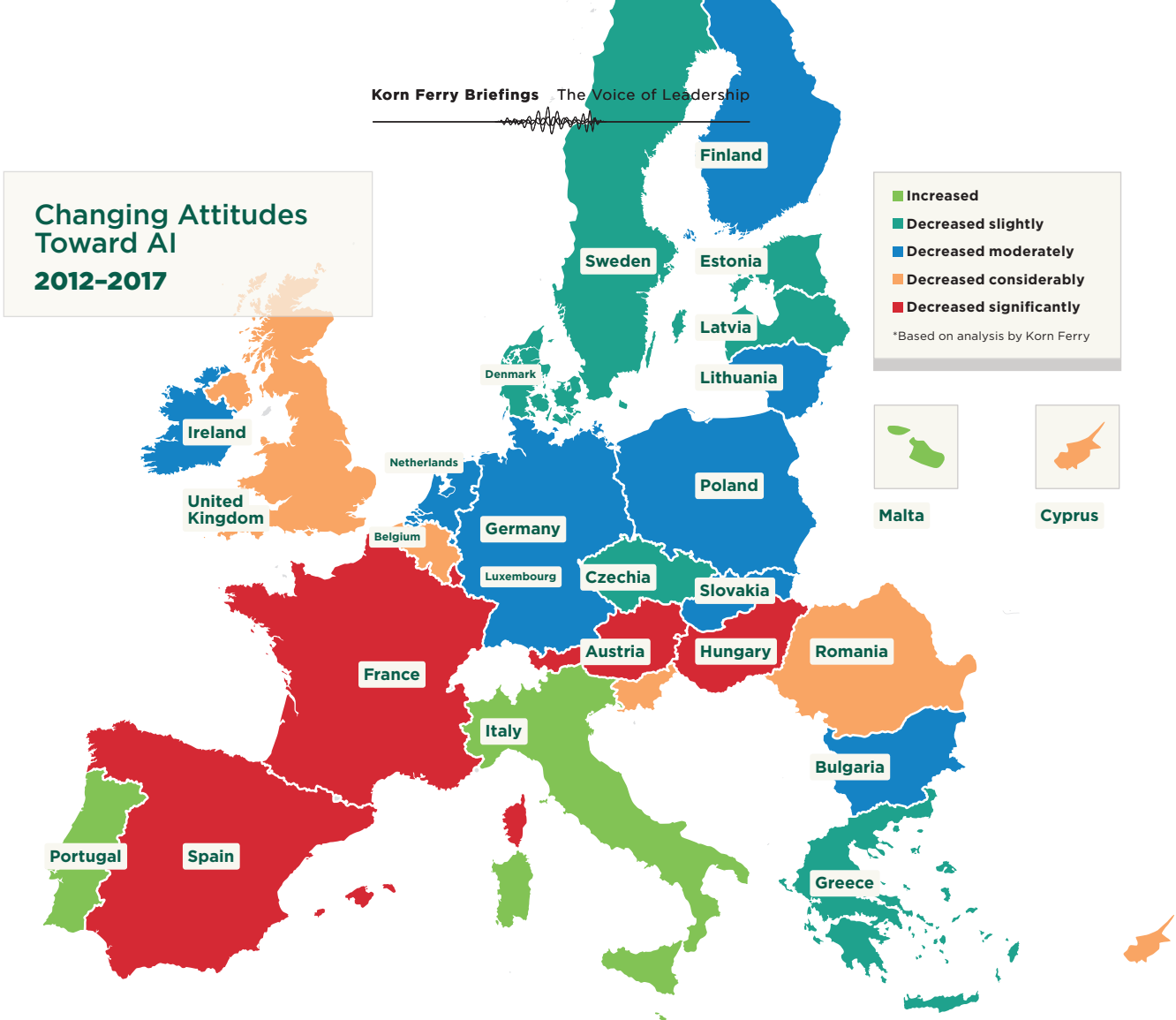
To be sure, there are some clear regional divides despite the overall hand-wringing. The study found that northern European countries tend to view robots more favorably, although even digital-embracing nations, such as Denmark and Sweden, saw their comfort levels fall. At the same time, opinions among southern European

The Takeaway

Many workers are still not prepared for the influx of robots and AI.



Changing Attitudes Toward AI 2012-2017



countries, including France and Greece, skewed much more negative. The only places where attitudes about robots and AI improved were in Italy, Portugal, and Malta.

A disparity among resources, stable economies, and access to education may explain this division, Penk says. “Northern parts of Europe are much richer and more advanced than the southern parts,” he explains. So where northern Europeans may see opportunities in innovation and robotic systems, southern Europeans see risk. “It translates into fear of automation, of losing jobs,” Penk says.

Regional differences aside, concerns over artificial intelligence in the workplace have caused the most discomfort among all Europeans, according to the German study. Researchers surveyed more than 80,000 EU residents and asked them to rate their attitudes on a nine-point scale, with 0 being “totally

uncomfortable” and 9 being “totally comfortable.” What they’ve found is that attitudes toward robots assisting at work dropped from a mean score of about 5 in 2012 to around 4 in 2017. That’s roughly a 20 percent decrease over a five-year span.

Will attitudes change? Experts say the best hope will come from corporate leadership, be it in Europe or elsewhere. Although robots can replace many menial jobs, studies have shown that they also may create more interesting work for others relieved of duties. What’s more, AI in general will always need humans as partners. “Leaders can’t just expect to incorporate AI and robots into their lines of business and not expect resistance, says Guangrong Dai, senior director of research at the Korn Ferry Institute. “It becomes the leaders’ responsibility to manage all of this anxiety employees are facing today.”