

The New Diversity: Working with Nonhumans

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In the workplace of the future, people will need to be comfortable working alongside digital intelligence, and businesses will need to find the optimal pairing of humans and machines.

FROM THE EDITOR

Futurist Steve Brown envisions a future in which humans and robots will work side by side—and no business will go unaffected. —Brian David Johnson

An employee's most important skill is the ability to work well with others. Soon, this will extend to include the ability to work alongside autonomous machines and algorithms. Welcome to the new diversity.

Diversity and inclusion remain key to business success and social justice. Savvy companies understand that

making their workplaces more inclusive yields benefits that go way beyond government requirements—increased diversity helps organizations maintain their market relevance and boost their speed of innovation. But despite efforts, many industries still lack workplace diversity in terms of gender, race, age, and sexual orientation. And to this list we must now add another

dimension: nonhumans. The future's most effective teams will include not only more women, people of color, LGBTQ individuals, and people of all ages, but also robots and algorithms.

YOU ARE YOUR NETWORK

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, your value as a worker was mostly related to physical ability: your strength, stamina, and dexterity. With the coming of the Information Age, what you knew and how well you created and processed information became increasingly important.

We now live in the Network Age, in which knowledge is being commoditized. Your value relates less to what you know and more to who you know, the strength of your relationships, and how well you can leverage your personal network to get things



done. That network will soon include nonhumans.

In many fields, human judgment—based on decades of experience—is being replaced by learning algorithms that make better-quality decisions than humans can. Consider the “merchant princes” in apparel companies who use their “gut feelings” to determine next year’s clothing lines and decide how to display and market merchandise. Predictive analytics will soon make this role obsolete.

As a result of such commoditization of knowledge and experience, your ability to collaborate on a team becomes more important to an organization than the knowledge rattling around in your head. That’s not to say that knowledge no longer matters; physical attributes such as stamina remain relevant. But your ability to network, and put that network to work for you, will be your most vital skill. Thus, in today’s Network Age, knowing how to collaborate to find the information you need to get something done is what matters. And in many cases, algorithms will provide much of that information.

THE NEW WORK TEAM: HUMAN AND DIGITAL INTELLIGENCE

To be successful in the workplace of the future, we’ll all need to be comfortable working alongside digital intelligence. This includes both autonomous machines and algorithms, respectively the physical and nonphysical instantiations of digital intelligence.

Smart managers will resist the temptation to simply replace humans with robots and algorithms as technology advances. This temptation is strong in some sectors of US industry, as bean counters worry about the \$15 minimum wage. But companies risk stripping out the humanity from their operations, and thus their brand, if

they blindly take this approach. Every brand has a human element at its foundation.

Leaders should step back and consider ways to optimize their labor force by forging partnerships between humans and machines (or between

humans and algorithms). As in any diverse team, humans and machines each have different strengths and weaknesses.

ROBOTS VERSUS HUMANS VERSUS ALGORITHMS

Machines have many advantages over humans. Robots are much stronger and have endurance and speed on their side. Algorithms, analytics, and AI not only operate at incredible speed, but they can spot complex patterns in vast seas of data that humans just can’t see.

But don’t panic. Humans still excel in areas where machines will remain weak for the foreseeable future; creativity, dexterity, and adaptability are fine examples. Another, empathy, is a vital skill for all aspects of customer service. We are of high value just by virtue of our humanity. After all, nobody wants a machine to tell them they have stage-3 liver cancer.

Machines and algorithms will succeed at repetitive tasks (even very complex ones) that are learned by analyzing huge datasets and that have measurable outcomes. For example, radiologists are highly trained and highly skilled. But if you show a deep-learning algorithm enough computed tomography scans and X-rays of potential tumors and then tell it which ones portray positive results


and which ones have negative results, the algorithm can be a very effective radiologist. The diagnostic component of other jobs such as doctors and mechanics will go the same way. Algorithms will first show up as assistants, working alongside the human

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experts. Once the humans’ accuracy is outstripped by the machine, the humans will be free to take on tasks that machines can’t do, like spending time face-to-face with patients.

AUGMENTING HUMAN CAPABILITIES

In these future workplaces, managers will need to design their teams so that tasks are intelligently split between humans and nonhumans. Managers will need to decide which tasks are best handled by humans and which by robots, and what role algorithms, analytics, and AI should play in helping humans perform their jobs better.

The robots are coming. That’s no longer in doubt. Analytics and AI will transform every sector of industry for the better. And so every business will need to find the optimal pairing of human and machine—and we’ll all need to learn to work with, and for, nonhumans. 

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