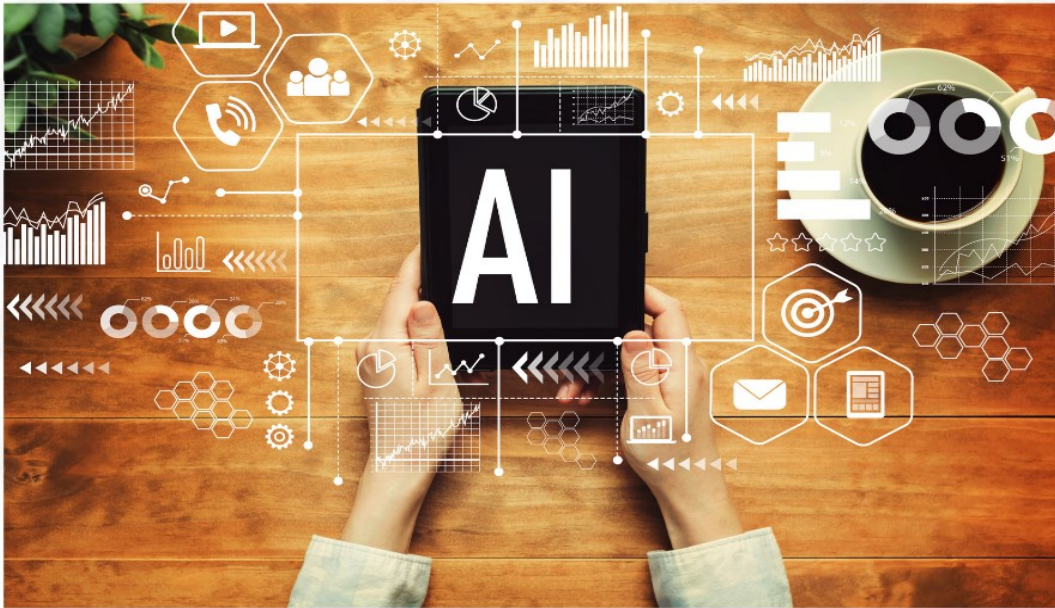


THE PANDEMIC AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

A GRAPHIC EXAMPLE OF HOW MACHINES NEED A HUMAN TOUCH TO REACH THEIR FULL POTENTIAL



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Before COVID-19 swept across the globe, there were very high hopes that Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning would help governments, researchers and health care providers learn from past events and behaviour to help plot a response. It did not take long for those hopes to be dashed.

Machine-learning models are designed to analyze data – huge tracts of data – to identify patterns and make predictions about the future. But they are only as good as the data they are able to incorporate. If the data is flawed, or if there is a huge lurch in behaviour that undermines historical data, then machine learning can be undermined.

Take online retail as an example. A [recent article](#) in the MIT Technology Review reported that within a few days of COVID-19 being declared a global pandemic, the top 10

most popular products sold on Amazon changed completely.

Gone were the phone cases, chargers and Lego that had served as the backbone of Amazon sales. In their place, people were buying toilet paper, face masks, groceries, and disinfecting products. By February, the top-10 seller lists in every major Amazon category were – one way or the other – connected to COVID-19.

The MIT article noted that AI is only as good as its data, and when subjected to seismic change, so too are machine learning's predictive powers. "Machine-learning models are designed to respond to changes," wrote Will Douglas Heaven, a senior editor at MIT Technology Review. "But most are also fragile; they perform badly when input data differs too much from the data they were trained on."

NATURAL INTELLIGENCE PREVAILS

Articles like this have caused me to rethink the role of AI in our lives, both now and in the future. Prior to the pandemic, we were often taunted with the threat that computers would soon be controlling our lives. We're tantalized by the idea of self-driving cars and traumatized by the idea of having our health assessed by a medical application rather than a physician.

However, as the pandemic has shown us so clearly, these machines are only as good as the data, and the humans inputting the data. Our current crisis is a reminder that AI will always require smart people with the competencies to not only find the right ways to apply the new technology but to also make sure it is used appropriately, especially in case of drastic changes.

“ In other words, Artificial Intelligence cannot reach its full potential without Natural Intelligence. ”

A well-established scientific concept, Natural Intelligence is often used to describe the ways in which people relate to their natural surroundings. In other words, things that we do well that come naturally to us, or which can be learned. In the current debate over the future of technology, Natural Intelligence and its focus on the important role of people is truly the counterpoint to AI and its dystopian corollaries.

I'm not alone in this assertion. Some of the world's leading thinkers are reminding us that people will still largely control how, where and when AI is used. In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that the "fourth industrial revolution" as it's called, is neither as impactful nor as profound as past iterations of technological change.

THE TRUE NATURE OF CHANGE

"There is growing evidence that work is not actually changing as fast or as dramatically as some dispatches would have us believe," said Jim Stanford, a Cambridge-trained Canadian economist who is the Director of the Centre for the Future of Work at the Australia Institute in Sydney and a professor of economics at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario.

"New work arrangements and employment relationships heralded as 'innovative' and 'revolutionary' ... are in fact hundreds of years old — it's just that they're now organized through smartphones. And where change is occurring, it isn't clear that technology is the main driver: rather, the conscious decisions of employers, investors and policy-makers are what determine how work evolves."

In some industries, AI has already arrived and there will continue to be a high priority for those leaders and organizations that can manage the introduction of new AI-powered applications in a productive fashion. The key to this success is to understand one of Stanford's principle points: good people using time-honoured competencies will determine the ultimate purpose of technology.

For many years now, organizations have been rather casual in planning for change. Some have offered their employees opportunities to acquire new skills or to further develop the skills they already possessed. However, the impact of this training has been limited because it has not been accompanied by organizational change.

You can give your employees new tools and ideas about how to do their jobs, but if the organization continues to maintain the status quo, then the training investment is nothing but career chicken soup.

Our casual approach to change has become particularly worrisome in an age when you can no longer go out and hire the people you need to transform your organization. The idea that you could purchase human capital to feed transformation was a security blanket that eroded our interest in building internal solutions to talent shortages.

Recently, I had a conversation with an executive from a big consulting firm who was facing great uncertainty about the future of his workforce.

“ I worry that we are not going to have enough talent, even if we have enough employees. ”

That is a chilling analysis that serves as a warning that you cannot change your workforce in the same way that you would change a piece of equipment.

The solution to this and other human capital challenges is to focus on Natural Intelligence as the precursor for any change or transformation. Put another way, you cannot master Artificial Intelligence without first developing your organization's Natural Intelligence.

DEFINING NATURAL INTELLIGENCE

There are five fundamental competencies that will define your organization's Natural Intelligence. The good news is that none of these competencies are new; these are time-tested characteristics present in most successful organizations. These qualities differentiate them from competitors and ensure that success is sustainable and not fleeting.

LEARNING AGILITY: Leading-edge organizations identify learning needs and deploy learning opportunities quickly and in a focused fashion. In a global skills shortage and with the introduction of AI-inspired applications, organizations need to encourage employees to embrace learning opportunities, and remain open to new ways of learning. Your workforce must have both a keen desire and a parallel capacity to learn.

THRIVING IN CHAOS: Organizations that downplay the impact of crises are often unprepared to survive them. Organizations that can maintain high efficiency by making decisions urgently, downplaying hierarchy and bureaucracy, and that have a strong preference for action over deliberation will prevail.

EMBRACING CHANGE: In challenging times like a pandemic, it's very important to embrace change with a willingness to adapt. Qualities like flexibility, risk taking and capacity to delegate take on extra importance. Sometimes people resist on the basis that what they were doing before was working. They will ask themselves, 'if it's not broke, why am I being asked to change what I'm doing?' Leaders must emphasize that embracing change is part of a path from good to great.

COGNITIVE LOAD MANAGEMENT: When change arrives quickly, you need to be able to identify and focus on the essentials while filtering out inconsequential information. This requires your leaders to employ mindfulness which can be developed through dynamic, modern training methods and by helping leaders avoid cognitive overload – trying to do too much too quickly.

CRITICAL THINKING: This competency is at the cultural core of most successful organizations. It includes the ability to tackle ambiguity using logic, identify solutions that match specific problems, and see an organization in a holistic fashion rather than narrowly. You need to develop your leaders' common sense, analytical skills, and appetite for learning.

So, let's continue preparing ourselves for the great AI transformation but before we do, let's take time to remind ourselves that **real live human beings – and not machines – are going to determine the impact of this technology.** AI may one day give us the ability to better predict and respond to pandemics but before that can happen, the machines will need a human touch to learn from our current crisis.

Jocelyn has extensive Canadian and international experience in the areas of human resources and business management in Europe, North America, the Middle East and Asia, in a variety of industries such as telecommunications, auto manufacturing, health care, government, retail, aerospace and banking. His interventions focus on Talent Management, especially in the areas of leadership assessment and development, performance management, succession management and selection best practices.

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