

The artificially

intelligent revolution

What implications might AI and automation have on leadership? We asked experts for their opinions.



Dirk Buyens

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Almost any aspect of decision making could be improved with artificial intelligence (AI) and that includes recruitment processes. Many recruiters rely on 'gut feeling': the hiring manager looks at a CV, listens to the candidate in an interview and makes a judgement call regarding whether he or she is the best person for the job.

AI could take the inherent uncertainty out of this process by identifying patterns in big data that the human brain simply cannot compute. It can do this extremely quickly, and for many more potential candidates than the manager could achieve.

Data from social networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn

can be used and, with sufficient trust, companies could make job offers without ever having met a candidate in person. This is already happening in some companies, but there is a lot more development to come in this field.

In many cases with AI, the technology is there, what needs work is people's attitudes towards, and understanding of, the technology. There is a natural resistance to new things, and AI is no different.

In the world of HR, front-office work is the area that could benefit most significantly from AI.

Imagine a bot that could swiftly and accurately inform employees of their employment rights, pay data, or pension details. At the moment, people perform these tasks and there are inconsistencies in the information employees receive. AI would eliminate these so that workers would get the correct answer every time. Clearly, these kinds of efficiencies would allow companies to employ fewer human beings, and would save money.

When implementing AI, the key element is not how much or how little of it you bring in, but ensuring that what you have works correctly. Robot surgeons can perform surgery quicker and more safely than their human equivalents and can work 24/7 without tiring. But the consequences of something going wrong are huge.

For workforces and the wider public to buy into AI on a large scale, they must learn to trust bots and believe they are going to get things right. For this reason, human intellect needs to keep up with the technology and understand how it works. The most common approach to implementation is to begin by having robots working in parallel with humans, so that if there is a problem, the person can act as a fallback. Over time, however, trust will be established and the fallback humans will no longer be necessary.

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Kurt April

Sainsbury fellow and professor of leadership, diversity and inclusion at University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business

We are already seeing productivity chatbots

As a new wave of AI technology impacts the workplace, the world of gaming has also penetrated this space. Many companies are gamifying the user experience within their online offerings, whether in terms of encouraging sales,

demonstrating experiences, story-boarding client solutions collaboratively, providing modular learning for employees, or even incentivising goals or KPIs for their staff.

Skills and qualities that can be developed through gaming include becoming more adept at dealing with failure (learning to try again and again); team working and collaboration (often within diverse teams, across cultures), and operating within enriched, compelling and multi-sensory solution environments.

In addition, people are becoming more comfortable with chatbots in their daily lives, to the extent that they are beginning to demand them in the workplace. This is reminiscent of what happened in the workplace after many of us became comfortable with using the Microsoft suite of products at university or in our early training. Chatbots are going to impact the workplace significantly – we are already seeing productivity chatbots and the digitising of HR processes, and employees are now able to access HR solutions from anywhere in the world.

On the employers' side, companies are using technology to enhance their processes, such as writing bias-free job descriptions. This increases their appeal to younger generations, making them employers of choice. Clearly, staff will require re-training in order to embrace new ways of working and new roles (for example, conversational design roles and digital transformation team roles to name a couple that already exist), as companies plot their technology roadmaps. Notions of data security, cyber breaches, ethics, control levels/management and distributive leadership become critical in these new environments.



Emma Parry
head of the changing world of work group,
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We are seeing rapid growth in the use of AI and robotics to automate simple, repetitive tasks such as factory work and back office duties, and to make complex decisions quickly and accurately via predictive algorithms.

This presents challenges for employers. First, organisations need to create a strategy for how they can benefit from AI to build efficiencies and improve decision making. This will require investment in technology, but also re-thinking around organisational structures and processes.

Second, there will be a greater need for those who are highly qualified, creative and can work in complex strategic environments.

While I do not subscribe to the fears about AI replacing humans completely (not yet anyway), some jobs will become obsolete. There will be a need for people with a whole new skill set in coordinating machines and managing the interface between humans and technology. Employers need to be thinking now about whether they have the workforce they need for the future and how they might develop this, as well as about re-deploying and motivating those whose work is increasingly automated.

Third, the increased use of technology more broadly in organisations means staff will become increasingly dispersed, and building relationships more challenging. Some employers are realising the need to create a social hub where employees can meet less formally to develop a more cohesive organisation.

Finally, the trend towards workers undertaking work via an AI platform in the gig economy means that employers need to think both about how they might benefit from the flexibility this approach might offer, while ensuring that employees are not put at risk from a lack of support and employment security. It is clear that AI is not a trend for the future but is something that employers need to be considering now.

Staff will become increasingly dispersed

How to thrive in an AGE OF DISRUPTION

There is a need to create a thriving and adaptable organisation that can excel in this digital world. But what does that mean and what does it take to deliver?

At the heart is a thriving workforce: one that is diverse and adaptable, investing in talent and encouraging collaboration and movement across business units and geographies. Sustained by an inclusive and growth-focused culture, organisations get the best out of their diverse workforce and inspire growth and development. These workforces encourage thinking beyond the traditional employment deal and focus on the whole person agenda – what energises people and how they can support employees' physical, financial and emotional wellbeing.

Thriving individuals feel they are growing and contributing with challenging and engaging work, developing skills and experiences that will tangibly benefit their career. They can see how their contribution is impacting the success of the company.

They are connected and empowered, able to access the knowledge and people they need to form teams that deliver. Thriving individuals feel healthy and energised enjoying their work for which they feel they are fairly rewarded and which enables them to balance work with health and lifestyle needs.

Thriving individuals feel they are growing



Margaret Ruiséal
people & digital practice leader, Mercer UK

Margaret has over 20 years' HR transformation experience with a sustained record of leading and implementing major global and international change programmes.

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What underpins success of these thriving organisations?



A future-focused people strategy: anchored in data to provide accurate predictions of future needs; and integrated to bring together the full talent and HR programmes into one comprehensive plan. Above all, these strategies are focused on individuals – providing policies that matter to them so they can truly thrive and be productive.



A compelling value proposition: something which only two in five workers say their company has. The new proposition addresses compensation and benefits but then differentiates around providing tools to help employees manage their health, wealth and career in a way that is personalised, flexible and addresses their individual needs.



A thriving work environment: employee experience is driven by day-to-day interactions and relationships. At the heart of a thriving organisation are leaders who have critical new skills around digital leadership, global mindset, design thinking – and build capabilities in the core "human areas" of leadership, enabling them to truly connect with their workforce. Employees also need the ability to drive their career forward, leveraging technology and career frameworks to help navigate their options but also coached by managers who understand their skills and aspirations.



A data-driven lab mindset: that encourages experimentation, design thinking, risk taking and a climate of continuous learning. Staffed with people who are interested in learning, with access to readily available data that informs options and predicts trends.

Digitisation, diversity and disruption are shaping the next decade of work. Companies that lead will be those that put people at the heart of their business. They will equip and coach managers to connect with their teams, provide challenging work and clear career paths and embed leading edge HR policies that support the employees' physical, emotional, financial and social wellbeing. Surviving digital disruption relies on connection with people. 🌟