

The Indispensable Option

“Please, save my womb.”

About this time last year, I was wheeling a patient into one of the operating suites of the largest tertiary hospital in Lagos, southwest Nigeria. The patient was Mrs. Babalola,¹ and those were her words to me as we made our way through the main theatre lobby.

She was a 38 year old woman who had been diagnosed with “massive” uterine fibroids, and I happened to be the medical intern responsible for doing most of the grunt work outlined in her treatment schedule from the time of her admission till when she was due for discharge. The day had finally come for her surgery and I clearly recall how she kept squeezing my hand in the lobby, anxiously repeating those words as I stopped to fill out a required checklist. We — her team of doctors — had already explained the procedure to her, reassured her over and over again, and even obtained her written consent to go ahead with it. However, she was still clearly worried about one particular detail of the surgery —

We were going to remove her uterus (her womb).

What Would Doctor Drucker Do?

The story of how we managed Mrs. Babalola’s condition at the Lagos University Teaching Hospital does, as we shall see, two very crucial things in the context of this essay. First, it reminds us, managers and entrepreneurs, about the fundamental reason why our businesses exist, and second, it compels us to acknowledge and explore the possibility of applying our innovations in a way that makes the human — and by extension, our society — the focus of the future we want to create for ourselves.

Peter Drucker, though he was not a medical doctor, was a true embodiment of a concept that has been central to the practice of modern Medicine. His idea that the customer comes first in business closely resembles one of the key teachings in clinical practice which recommends that the treatment prescribed for any person should revolve around the specific needs of that person. This philosophy, in a simple phrase, is what healthcare professionals like me have been rigorously trained to imbibe as *person-centred care*.² But from the timeless works of Peter Drucker, I have also come to know it as the *human-centred approach* to management.

¹ For the purpose of confidentiality, her real name is not mentioned here.

² McCance, T., McCormack, B. and Dewing, J. (2011). An exploration of person-centredness in practice. *Online Journal of Issues in Nursing*, 16(2), p.1.

It is this doctrine of “prioritizing the person” that inspired us — just one hour before the commencement of Mrs. Babalola’s surgery — to choose a technique other than what we had originally planned. And while it can be argued that we could have done so earlier, it was actually a difficult conclusion for us to reach considering the uniqueness of her personal circumstances and the risk involved.

A Complicated Situation

Prior to the day of her surgery, we conducted a wide range of clinical investigations. First, when we physically examined her, we found that her uterus was about 36 weeks size which is obstetric parlance implying that her belly had become so large that anyone who saw her would assume she was heavily pregnant.

But contrary to being heavy with child, the imaging studies we did revealed that her uterus had actually been invaded by multiple fibroids of different shapes and sizes. And even though they were all benign (non-cancerous) tumours, the sheer size and nature of the dominant ones would make them extremely difficult to remove without having to sacrifice the entire uterus in the process.

To paint a clearer picture, the largest of all the fibroids measured up to 20cm in diameter — about the size of a watermelon — and many of the smaller ones had become too intimately attached to her ovaries as well as some other normal structures in her pelvis. Hence, from a surgical standpoint, it appeared easier and far more reasonable to evacuate the whole uterus from her pelvis than to excise the tumours individually — an approach which would put her at a much higher risk of bleeding and possible death.

We discussed at length with her on many different occasions, mostly emphasizing the reason why removing her uterus appeared to be the best possible option. However, she still wanted us to consider attempting a procedure that would allow her uterus to be left intact. We already explained that such an attempt would be too dangerous, but there was an obvious reason why she wanted us to try.

Mrs. Babalola was a woman, married for close to 10 years, with no child of her own. She had been trying with her husband to get pregnant but had not been successful largely due to the increasing size and location of her fibroids. She had visited nearly every major hospital within and outside the state, searching for an option that would allow her to have a child without getting rid of her uterus. But wherever she went, she was always told the same thing —

They weren’t willing to take that risk.

When she came to us, we were surprised to learn that she had already been counselled, repeatedly, on the availability of other childbearing options like surrogacy and adoption. But despite this, she maintained that she wanted to have the option of being able to conceive and bear children by herself. She became very disappointed and downcast

when all we did was to repeat the same things she had been told all along. But the real reason why she wanted a child from her own womb was an issue that wasn't foreign to us at all.

In many of the local tribes in Nigeria — and Africa by extension — women are raised to take great pride in their own childbearing ability. Mrs. Babalola, who happened to be a *Yoruba* woman, was one who subscribed to the cultural ideology that a woman's status and "worth" in society is, among other things, measured by the number of children she has conceived and successfully delivered in her lifetime. As trivial and simple-minded as that seemed to us, and may seem to you, it was a valid and significant concern from her personal point of view. And since our guiding principle as physicians underscores the importance of person-centred care, we recognized that we still had an obligation to pay attention to her concerns.

Notwithstanding, after we finished reviewing all the information available to us from her personal history and her clinical test results, our conclusion still remained that removing her fibroids and retaining her uterus in the process, were two outcomes that couldn't be achieved together.

Management — The Robot Dimension

There are many subtle elements in Mrs. Babalola's story that mimic this challenge of management in business today. Judging by the way leading technology companies operate, it appears our business leaders have tacitly concluded that solving human problems with Artificial Intelligence and preserving our human values in the process, are two outcomes that are mutually incompatible.

The AI solutions being designed and implemented today make it seem inevitable that there will, someday, be a complete erosion of our collective human essence. And although Drucker embraced the dynamics of technological innovation and was never influenced by any catastrophic predictions about them, he still encouraged us to be aware of their potential implications for us as a species.

In the final page of his 1973 classic, *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*, Drucker expressed with great optimism that "*there is every indication that the period ahead will be an innovative one, one of rapid change in technology, society, economy, and institutions.*"³ But in his 1986 book, *The Frontiers of Management*, he issued a warning that "*automation will put severe strains — economic, social, political — on the system.*"⁴

³ Drucker, P. F. (1973). *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*. New York: Harper & Row, p.803.

⁴ Drucker, P. F. (1986). *The Frontiers of Management*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, p.54.

To prove this warning, a recent McKinsey study has shown that about 800 million jobs worldwide are at risk of being lost to automation by the year 2030.⁵ The study also revealed that, as a result, income inequality is expected to rise further thereby making it likely that we will have to grapple with unprecedented levels of socio-political instability. But even though the authors made room for the argument that automation is not likely to be a purely destructive force, the question still remains:

What are we doing to ensure that it doesn't become one?

Imagine, for example, a middle-aged taxi driver in Lagos who has decided to sell his taxi franchise so as to begin driving for Uber instead,⁶ citing the speed and convenience offered by Uber's technology as his reason for choosing to switch. What will become of him and his livelihood when Uber makes a complete shift into purely autonomous cars? By choosing to deploy this particular type of cars in the future, has Uber not silently conceded that this driver, and others like him, are not relevant in the framework of AI for ride-sharing? Can it not be said that the current business case for self-driving cars has been made on the premise that human beings occupy an increasingly unnecessary role in the business of transportation?

Why does it appear that such conclusions have been reached, though unstated? And why is this mode of thinking a feature that exists across sectors of several other industries?

I will hazard a guess that it appears this way because we are yet to fully denounce Milton Friedman's ruthless doctrine that "*the social responsibility of a business is to increase its profits.*"⁷ It is common for companies to tout fancy slogans that are intended to give the impression that they are continuously innovating because they deeply care about people. But of course, no company will admit that the actual driving force behind its aggressive development and integration of advanced tech solutions is the relentless pressure it feels to increase production or service output and to cut operational costs — which, in most cases, is largely constituted by salaries, wages or commissions.

Be that as it may, I am not suggesting that companies should refrain from adopting AI simply because jobs will be lost in the process. Rather, I am asking why companies are not vigorously trying to preserve jobs in the process of adopting AI. In other words, I am examining why companies find it easier to eliminate human input than to create new or better roles for them.

The bottom line is that there is a quietly prevailing notion that we cannot innovate in ways to keep our human essence at work. And this, similar to the impression that we

⁵ Manyika, J., Lund, S., Chui, M., Bughin, J., Woetzel, J., Batra, P., Ko, R. and Sanghvi, S. (2017). *Jobs lost, Jobs gained: What the future of work will mean for jobs, skills, and wages*. McKinsey Global Institute.

⁶ *Uber* is an app-based, peer-to-peer ridesharing, taxi cab, food delivery, and transportation network company with operations in 633 cities worldwide.

⁷ Friedman, F. (1970). A Friedman doctrine-. *The New York Times Magazine*, p.17.

could not perform a surgery to retain Mrs. Babalola's womb, is a forgone conclusion that shouldn't exist.

Reframing the Situation

About an hour before her surgery was scheduled to start, we decided to have one final conference to discuss a few details about the procedure. It was meant to be brief and to ensure that all members of the operating team were in perfect harmony with the plan. However, from the nature and tone of the discussion as it went on, it became clear that there were many of us who sincerely empathized with her desire to keep her womb.

Slowly and unexpectedly, the meeting began to evolve into an intellectual debate where we sought to know what our plan would have been if her life actually depended on our ability to salvage her uterus. We agreed that we could not disregard the risk, but more importantly, we agreed that we had not really explored the chances of success simply because we had dismissed it as the unfeasible option from the start. As I observed in astonishment, we were gradually inching towards a moment I had not imagined would come.

That moment, finally came.

After everyone had submitted their contributions, our consultant, who happened to be the chief surgeon, summarized the case and said on a final note —

“If we really want to help her, then we have to do this.”

And just like that, retaining her uterus so that she could have a chance at bearing children of her own, shifted from being the unfeasible to being the indispensable option.

The surgery, as expected, turned out to be a gruelling process. And despite being careful to avoid injuring sensitive structures in her pelvis especially prominent blood vessels, the bleeding became torrential at some point. I could feel the steady rise in anxiety throughout the length of the procedure even though we were all prepared for the worst. But fortunately for us, there were additional pints of reserved blood which we started transfusing into her until the surgery was over.

In retrospect, nothing was more satisfying than the fact that we successfully managed to preserve most of the structural integrity of Mrs. Babalola's uterus, though we had to resect her Left ovary and fallopian tube due to the extensive fibroid invasion there. But because it was very possible for her to get pregnant with her Right ovary left intact, nobody could dispute that we gave Mrs. Babalola the chance she so desperately desired.

Could we not give humanity the chance that it desires? The chance for us humans to preserve our unique values in the face of rapidly advancing technology? Do we really

prefer to settle for a reality where AI inevitably makes us redundant? Do we not reckon that we can attempt a procedure to retain control over our shared future?

Management — The Human Dimension

Obviously, we need to change our minds.

We need to stop perceiving our human contribution as the expendable resource. If we are to retain it, then we need to be willing to take risks. Specifically, risks that might involve coping with the cost of making human input integral to our business and innovation frameworks. Of course, there may be repercussions for such decisions in the effort to maximize profits. But this brief insight from Drucker might offer us one way to make it feasible.

*“Whenever an impact cannot be eliminated without an increase in cost, it becomes incumbent upon management to think ahead and work out the regulation which is most likely to solve the problem at the minimum cost and with the greatest benefit to public and business alike. And it is then management’s job to work at getting the right regulation enacted.”*⁸

In the prelude to this statement, Drucker acknowledged that it is not always possible to convert a negative impact of business into an opportunity without incurring more costs. He then pointed out that these added costs will be a competitive disadvantage unless every player in the industry agreed to the same rule. Hence regulation, in his view, emerged an effective way to make this possible.

Borrowing from this insight, I think we can develop a global charter which necessitates the participation of humans in jobs executable by AI. This will mean that workers will have to accept and adapt to new roles on the same job. However, it would not preclude workers from being dismissed if they do not contribute suitably to the job. As a matter of fact, it is the duty of workers themselves to remain relevant, more so, drawing upon the help of managers and innovators.

Considering this, here is a summary of the roles I believe each of these persons have to play in transforming our world of work into a truly human-centred one:

a) Workers

Two years ago, during my stint as an accounting intern for Audeo, a back-office support firm in Lagos, I was required to participate in regular knowledge sharing sessions organized by HR for employees of the company. The idea was for us to routinely ask

⁸ Drucker, P. F. (2011). *People and Performance: The Best of Peter Drucker on Management*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, p.305.

each other critical questions about our respective roles in the context of recent industry innovations and to challenge ourselves to learn skills that would give us the edge for future client jobs.

This kind of practice should be universally adopted among employees irrespective of their roles. And it should be standard because I believe workers have a responsibility to demonstrate their commitment to the job by taking advantage of opportunities to re-learn and transition into new roles as machines increasingly assume the ones they currently occupy.

b) Managers

Earlier on, I suggested that managers need to be willing to experiment with business models and regulatory frameworks that make it absolutely necessary to retain the human factor in delivering performance. In addition, and as exemplified by Audeo's HR, managers also need to establish a work culture that stimulates workers to rethink their job descriptions and to comfortably seek help in adapting to changing circumstances.

This sort of leadership is pertinent, now more than ever. If we desire not to live in a world where masses of people are stripped of the dignity they derive from doing meaningful work, then managers should be careful not to obsess over profits so much that they downplay the importance of providing re-training and role support systems for their workers.

c) Innovators

Finally, this might probably be the most ridiculous of my recommendations so far. But as is typical of anything revolutionary, it first sounds ridiculous until it works.

I believe it is possible to merge our human capabilities with AI, literally.

This belief probably arises from my own enthrallment with a strange concept depicted in an episode of *Black Mirror*,⁹ where virtually all human beings had a microchip implanted at the back of their ears that gave them the ability to store and process information as quickly and as efficiently as machines. Impressively, and to show just how feasible this is, Neuralink,¹⁰ has already embarked on a similarly outrageous project

⁹ *Black Mirror* is a British science fiction anthology TV series created by Charlie Brooker, which examines modern society, particularly with regard to the unanticipated consequences of new technologies.

¹⁰ *Neuralink* is an American neurotechnology company founded by Elon Musk and eight others, reported to be developing implantable brain-computer interfaces (BCIs).

which aims to minimize the risks that superintelligent AI poses to the human race in the future.¹¹

In closing, these innovation ideas are just examples of how developers of new tech should think while designing AI solutions for mass adoption. And if harmonized properly with the aforementioned roles of workers and managers in business, I believe there is a chance that we can actually create a world where AI is harnessed as a tool to enhance our human experience, rather than erase it.

¹¹ Urban, T. (2017). *Neuralink and the Brain's Magical Future*. [online] Wait But Why. Available at: <https://waitbutwhy.com/2017/04/neuralink.html#part6> [Accessed 9 Jun. 2018].